NF

ISSUE #63: TEN YEARS OF NINTENDO FORCE

OCTOPATH TRAVELER II

POKÉMON SCARLET & VIOLET

MARIO + RABBIDS SPARKS OF HOPE

THE NINTENDO FORCE **GAME OF THE YEAR AWARDS 2022**

HARVESTELLA

INTERVIEW: **MEGAN FOX** CREATOR OF SKATEBIRD

DIGIMON SURVIVE

NICKELODEON KART RACERS 3: SLIME SPEEDWAY

BAYONETTA 3

SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS: THE COSMIC SHAKE

ANOTHER CRAB'S TREASURE

JANUARY/ FEBRUARY 2023

FIRE EMBLEM ENGAGE

Tenth Anniversary Celebration!

POWERFUL PREDECESSOR

BEFORE WE BEGIN our 10-year anniversary celebration, it's only right to remember NF's original inspiration!

Publishing Nintendo Force for a full decade also means it's been over a decade since Nintendo Power got unplugged. And you – especially if you're a younger reader – may not even remember it at all! I know my own kids love to read each one of our new NF issues as they're published, but they have no memory of what came before: a legendary magazine that played a critical role in shaping video game culture in America in the late '80s and early '90s, then kept on covering Nintendo's newest releases all the way up until the end of 2012.

Nintendo Power came into existence at just the right time. It evolved from an earlier publication – Nintendo Fun Club News – which was a simpler newsletter covering NES games in 1987 and early 1988. But it only ran for seven issues, because Nintendo of America rightly saw that there was an opportunity to expand into a much bigger format! Nintendo Power took over in the middle of 1988 with a bi-monthly spectacle of colorful comics, loud game previews, tips and tricks for the latest titles and even TV and movie celebrity interviews. It was instrumental in introducing the NES to a much wider audience, and a critical source of information for diehard fans in an age before the Internet became a fixture in everyday life.

The Nintendo Power brand name lives on today through a podcast Nintendo produces once a month, but its true magic will only ever be found in its magazines. If you've never read them, I encourage you to seek out and flip through a few! Preserved scans of each issue are available for free download at Retromags.com! **— LUCAS**

July/August 1988

December 2012

ISSUE #63: TEN YEARS OF NINTENDO FORCE

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ON THE COVER

We're right back where we started! The very first issue of Nintendo Force featured a brand-new Fire Emblem game on its front cover – Fire Emblem Awakening – and the timing just so happens to be working out that there's another new Fire Emblem, Engage, due to launch shortly after this 10th anniversary issue goes out the door! We also took this opportunity to correct a 10-year slight against Vaike: He was hidden behind the column on NF #1. Now he's in full view! (Sorry about that old placement, buddy!)

INBOX

A DECADE OF DEDICATION

My, how time flies!

It seems like this journey began only yesterday, but as of the release of this issue, we've been publishing Nintendo Force Magazine for over a decade! Over 10 years in the trenches, carrying the torch that Nintendo Power dropped when they ended their run in December 2012 – and ensuring that coverage of Nintendo games in the printed magazine medium has remained constant and continuous all that while!

I want to take the opportunity here, right up front, to thank our tireless team! Without the unfailing dedication of our writers and artists for over 10 years, we wouldn't have made it even anywhere close to this major milestone. As the old wisdom states: If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together. If I'd foolishly tried to tackle this whole magazine business as a solo project, I'm sure I would've run out of steam almost immediately! But with the whole great NF team working in tandem, we've been able to keep up our regular publishing rhythm of a new issue every two months for this entire past decade. (Even tossed an extra issue into two of those years, too!)

Our central feature this time, Ten Years of Nintendo Force, reflects back on our whole issue-publishing history up to this point, while also looking back on the journey Nintendo has taken as a company over that same time period. Can you believe the Wii U had just launched when we started, and now we're nearly six years deep into the life cycle of its much more successful successor? Time flies, I'm telling you!

Please enjoy this celebratory issue, kicking off NF Year #11!

LUCAS M. THOMAS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ISSUE #62: NOVEMBER/ DECEMBER 2022

We wrapped up the year of 2022 with a two-cover treatment for Pokémon Scarlet and Pokémon Violet, while inside the issue we took a wide look at wide-open exploration in open-world environments. Hopefully our final preview prepared you for Paldea, and this issue holds our review of the two titles – just ride your choice of either Koraidon or Miraidon ahead to Page 74!

In the Player's Poll, we asked you all to look back on the last 10 years of Nintendo titles and pick the one very best game of the decade. Then, to give equal time to reflect on their failures, we asked you to name the company's biggest blunder from the past 10 years as well. Finally, the last question asked you to look ahead: What's the one Nintendo Switch release planned to debut in 2023 that you're most looking forward to? Answers below!

LETTERS

I think the best game Nintendo released in the past decade is the original Splatoon. The concept was so original and fun that I purchased the Wii U just for that game! It's been revolutionary in creating a team-based shooter that is not necessarily focused on gunning down the opponents, but wherein the primary objective is peaceful and pretty. Which isn't to say that the actual gameplay is either of those things; as a matter of fact, it's cutthroat and messy! It's competitive and casual at the same time, which has fostered relationships and team building outside of the game itself. Without Splatoon I would not have the group of online friends that I do today. **– PATRICK CHIN CHEONG**

I think that my favorite game that Nintendo released in the past decade is The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. Nintendo did an amazing job on the game. From the enemies to the side-quests, this open-world game is the best. There are so many things to do and explore, and I could spend hours messing with Bokoblins.

One of Nintendo's biggest mistakes was releasing consoles that were not the best, like the Wii U. Because of the bulkiness of the console and the annoying touchpad, it wasn't good. It could have been better, and it just wasn't necessary. But I feel like the Switch was a good recovery. **– EAGAN**

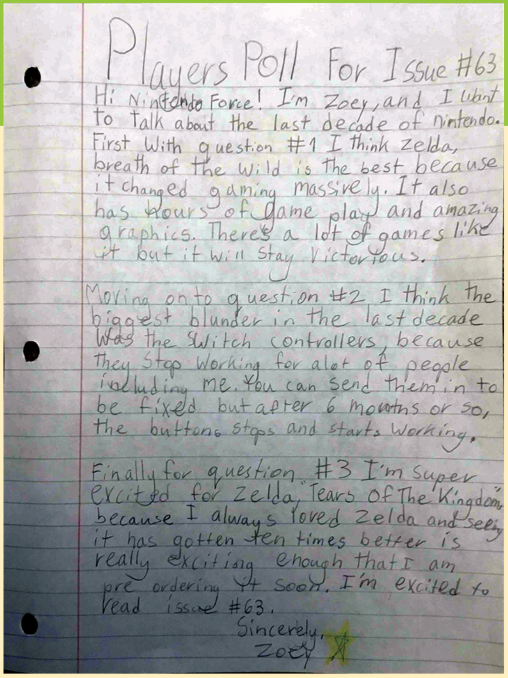
The past decade has been quite great in terms of Nintendo games, despite the not-so-hot flop that was the Wii U. But if I had to name the one best: Super Mario Odyssey. While Breath of the Wild was a fantastic game, and Splatoon became a breakout hit that launched a brand-new IP that sells like hotcakes, I can't help but give it to Super Mario Odyssey. 3D Mario was in a rut, and while the Galaxy and 3D titles were quite good in their own respects, there's something to be said about returning to a classic collect-a-thon formula.

Their biggest blunder of the last decade is the selfsame biggest blunder they KEEP making: snubbing their IPs. They keep ignoring the fans who desire titles such as F-Zero, Golden Sun and Wario Land. By the time we finally DO revisit these titles, people will have long since given up and have already moved on to greener pastures. Or worse, these games won't be remembered, as it will have been far too long since they were last relevant.

Doubtlessly, I'm most looking forward to Tears of the Kingdom. I bought my Switch close to launch and only owned Breath of the Wild. I adored every minute I spent with it! If Tears of the Kingdom can be half of what its predecessor is, I'll be content. **– STEVEN**

On principle alone, I'd say the best game was Super Smash Bros. Ultimate. (Finally giving me Ridley and Banjo as fighters? Why yes, I DID squeal.) But I also must give props to Rhythm Heaven Megamix. Probably the game I put the most time (and smiles) into.

Title I'm most excited for? Pikmin 4! I was really starting to give up hope. Now my faith in miracles has been restored! (That was fast.) **– ALEX WINTER**



Players Poll For Issue #63

Hi Nintendo Force! I'm Zoey, and I want to talk about the last decade of nintendo. First With question #1 I think Zelda, breath of the wild is the best because it changed gaming massively. It also has hours of game play and amazing graphics. There's a lot of games like it but it will stay Victorious.

Moving onto question #2 I think the biggest blunder in the last decade Was the Switch controllers, because They Stop Working for alot of people including me. You can send them in to be fixed but after 6 months or so, the buttons stops and starts working.

Finally for question #3 I'm Super excited for Zelda, Tears Of The Kingdom, because I always loved Zelda and seeing it has gotten ten times better is really exciting enough that I am pre ordering it soon. I'm excited to read issue #63.

Sincerely,
Zoey

ZOEY'S WRITTEN RESPONSES TO THE PLAYER'S POLL

Hi Nintendo Force! I'm Zoey, and I want to talk about the last decade of Nintendo. First, with Question #1, I think Zelda: Breath of the Wild is the best because it changed gaming massively. It also has hours of gameplay and amazing graphics. There's a lot of games like it, but it will stay victorious.

Moving on to Question #2, I think the biggest blunder in the last decade was the Switch controllers, because they stop working for a lot of people, including me. You can send them in to be fixed, but after six months or so, the buttons stop working.

Finally, for Question #3, I'm super excited for Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom, because I always loved Zelda and seeing it has gotten 10 times better is really exciting enough that I am pre-ordering it soon.

I'm excited to read Issue #63. **— ZOEY**

And we're excited to make your letter a part of it!

Nintendo's done a lot in the last decade, especially in the way of resurrecting franchises that were otherwise sure to meet their end, and that's why Fire Emblem Awakening is my personal best release of the last 10 years. (It didn't come out in the U.S. until 2013, so I'm counting it!) It revived and introduced many to an incredible franchise and genre.

For their biggest blunder in the last decade, it's gotta be the release of the Wii U. I love it, don't get me wrong, but the marketing was just not it. People were too confused, and there wasn't enough coming out for it first-party-wise for people to look into it more. It was such a missed opportunity!

For the game I'm looking forward to the most in 2023? Definitely Fire Emblem Engage, and I'm not just saying that because Alear's picture is printed next to this question! Fire Emblem has brought me close to so many incredible people that I can't help but be stoked for every new entry. Definitely helps that my boys Marth, Sigurd and Leif are looking to be featured! **— SARAH**

That's one of the easiest questions you've ever asked! Even with heavy hitters like Smash Ultimate and Mario Maker 2, The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild is not just Nintendo's best game of the decade, it's their greatest game of all-time. No other game gives the player as much choice, and its beautiful art style and incredible world makes every mountain worth climbing.

Aside from not making Shovel Knight a playable character in Smash Ultimate (please do it next time Sakurai!), I'd have to say Nintendo's biggest blunder would be their handling of Nintendo Switch Online. It could have been an Xbox Game Pass competitor — imagine a Netflix-like app with hundreds of Nintendo games from the NES to the GameCube (and maybe the Wii?), all for one small monthly fee! Instead we've ended up with a few hand-picked NES, Super NES and N64 titles that are fun, but don't really make the whole package worthwhile. **— JONAH C.**

The best game is probably Zelda: Breath of the Wild. I've been able to pick it back up several times over the last five years and just explore and discover new bits and temples — it's like vacation.

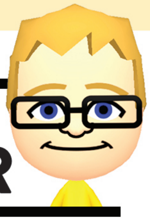
The biggest blunder was probably naming the Wii U. I think it could've been modestly more successful if it was given its own unique branding not tied to the previous generation.

I'm gonna break from Zelda and say Sea of Stars looks like the kind of game that captured me for months as a teenager in the '90s. It looks brilliant. **— RICH B.**

The biggest mistake Nintendo's made in the past 10 years has got to be the "finish it later" lesson they learned from Splatoon 1; which is the wrong lesson to take from that game. It only works on Splatoon because that's how "metas" work nowadays: Players respond to balance patches and new content, and have to find new ways to win. But Mario Sports? Those aren't competitive games. Perhaps it's just the irony of Nintendo fans that Mario Party is seen as a more competitive game than the games based on actual competitive sports, but when you hold back content from them you don't retain interest. You just alienate the casuals by releasing a game that feels empty and hollow compared to past entries. Same with Animal Crossing, Switch Sports and Kirby: Star Allies; the latter of which HAL actually LEARNED from and made sure the NEXT Kirby was actually feature-complete at launch. I don't know what sort of gain Nintendo thinks they're getting from releasing games unfinished with "free updates" later. Maybe it's to combat piracy and emulation. Maybe they're just hanging out with Ubisoft too much. Either way, it just eats at their good will. **— ZEEBOR**

I would say Nintendo's biggest mistake was not having any music for the Switch home screen, unlike all the other consoles. So there won't be any nostalgic music for the Switch in a few years! **— SMBOB**

CARTER'S CORNER



Hello again! Here are some answers to the quiz from last time. My favorite new Pokémon from Scarlet & Violet are . . . Sprigatito and its two evolutions (obviously), Nacli (because it looks like the Rock Mushroom from Super Mario Galaxy 2), Fidough's evolution and Pawmi's final evolution. And, after two and a half decades, Dunsparce finally got an evolution! So that's one of my new favorites too. Sprigatito, Fidough and Pawmi's evolutions are all on my team.

As of this writing it's December 2, and I already have 16 out of 18 badges! I only have the Ice Gym and the Fighting Crew Base left, which I can probably finish this weekend. I'm going to beat the Team Star adventure first, Calvin is going to beat the Titans adventure first and my Dad will beat the Champion first.

Here are some tips if you're just starting the game. The Bug and Grass Gyms are the closest and easiest Gyms, so they could be easy to beat if you picked Fuecoco. If you chose Sprigatito or Quaxly, you could beat the nearby Rock Titan, and the Flying Titan is the fourth easiest. If you're looking for Team Star, then the Dark Crew is the easiest, with Pokémon around Level 20.

Vaultin' Veluza! I'm almost out of room, so it's quiz time again! How many Level 100 Pokémon will I have by the time we print the next issue? (Don't guess zero.) See you next time!

OWEN'S OWN POKÉMON IDEAS

¡Hola! Me llamo, Owen! (Spanish for "Hi! My name is Owen!") Upon seeing the announcement of Wiglett for Pokémon Scarlet & Violet, I felt inspired. In Pokémon Shadow & Rainbow (fan-made) are these discoveries of "convergent" species based on Cyclizar, Koraidon and Miraidon. Bioluminescent, legless and night-vision-goggle-wearing Nighclizar recklessly speed on spiked tires nocturnally at 60 mph max; dependent on themselves and not so much on humans. (Dragon/Dark; The Slither Pokémon.) With potent toxins that mirror its ruthless behavior and slithering sneakiness, Koraimon have trouble trusting anybody, rolling up into a ball to hunt for sport or food. (Dragon/Poison; The Noxious Pokémon.) Miraimon, with its telepathy to Trainers and telekinetic anti-gravity driving powers, is astonishingly sympathetic considering its incredibly vast intellect and language. (Dragon/Psychic; The Autonomous Pokémon.) Which one of the them would you pick? **— OWEN M.**

THE PLAYER'S POLL

Congratulations to **Zoey**, the winner of our most recent Player's Poll! Your new chance to win is below, and this time around we're interested to read your responses to three questions about Mario and the movies!

QUESTION #1

The new animated Super Mario Bros. Movie opens in April. Which character (and/or voice actor) do you think will really steal the show?

QUESTION #2

Have you ever watched the live-action Super Mario Bros. movie from 1993? If so, what are you thoughts on it now, 30 years later?

QUESTION #3

It's safe to assume that more movies are on the way from Nintendo in the future. Which of their other franchises do you think should get a film?

Send your responses to **PlayersPoll@NFMagazine.com** with the subject line "Player's Poll for Issue #64" – this time, one reader whose answers are picked for print will win four tickets to see The Super Mario Bros. Movie!

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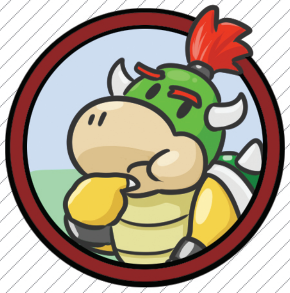
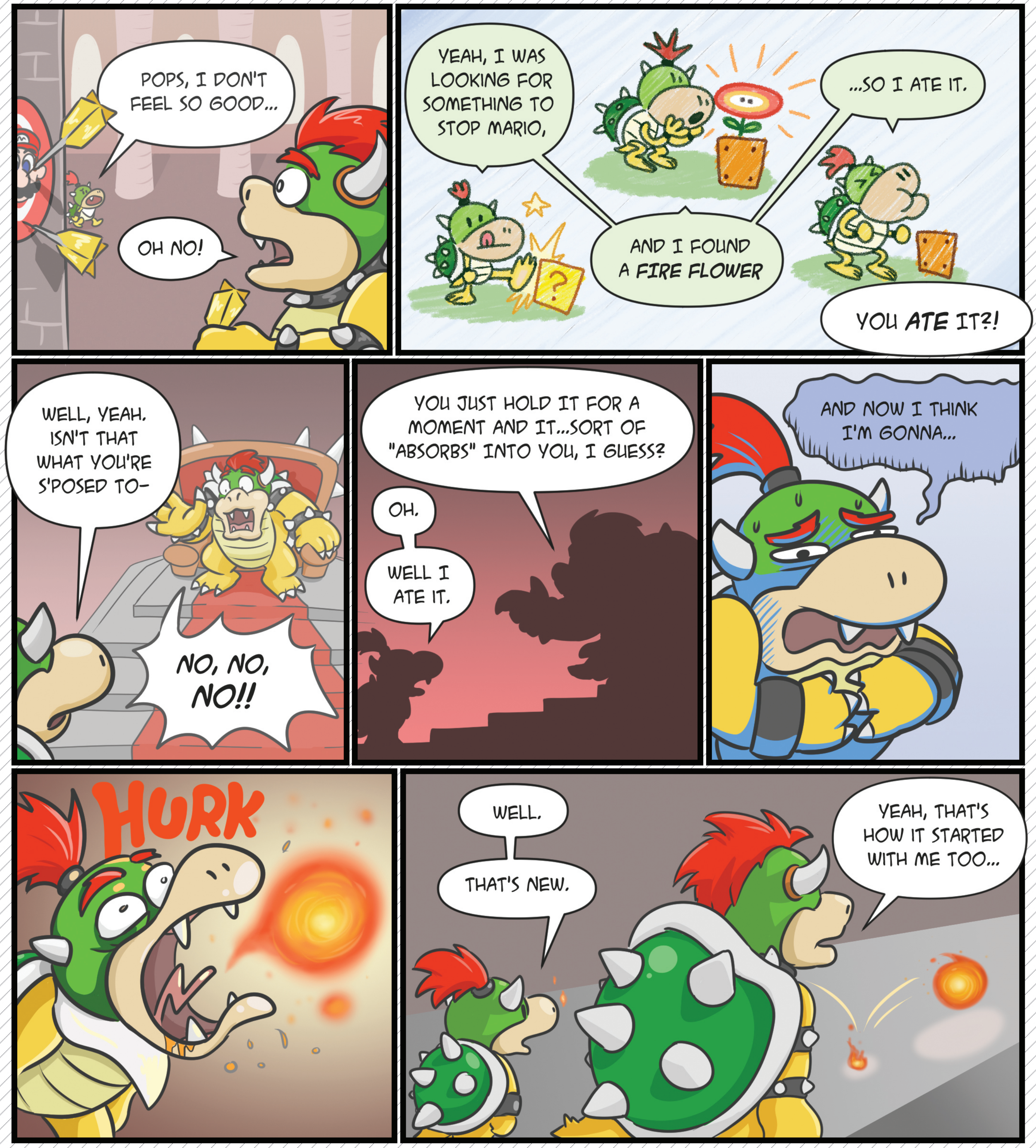


Bowser Jr. in... Flower Child



BY MATTHEW TARANTO

"A 10-Year Commitment"

Call of Duty will apparently go to war on Nintendo systems for the next decade.

THE CAMARADERIE ACROSS platforms continues?

Once upon a time, we actually covered the Call of Duty series here in the pages of Nintendo Force. Our very first issue included a review of Call of Duty: Black Ops II on Wii U, and in our sixth edition at the end of that same year of 2013, we evaluated the Wii U version of Call of Duty: Ghosts as well.

But in the decade since? Well, Call of Duty kind of ghosted Nintendo fans.

This massively popular first-person shooter franchise releases a new sequel every year, but 2013 was the last time Nintendo players were invited to attend its annual party. The series shifted its attention to the more powerful PlayStation, Xbox and PC platforms, then never looked back.

. . . Until now! Seemingly at random on a Tuesday night in December, Phil Spencer (the Head of Xbox) tweeted that Call of Duty's coming back to the Big N. And for an entire decade!

"Microsoft has entered into a 10-year commitment to bring Call of Duty to Nintendo following the merger of Microsoft and Activision Blizzard King. Microsoft is committed to helping bring more games to more people – however they choose to play."

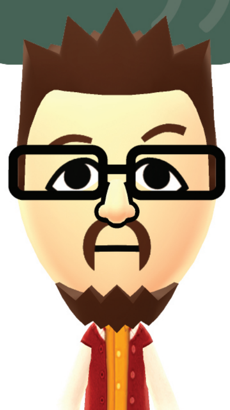
The critical piece of information there is the "following the merger" part. This announcement hasn't been made out of the good of Phil's heart, or because he really cares about the poor Call of Duty-deprived Switch-only gamers of the world. It's happening because he wants the big corporate acquisition to move forward.

Microsoft announced their intent to acquire Activision in January 2022 for a sum of $68,700,000,000 – a deal that would propel Xbox to become the third-biggest game company on the planet. Sony (currently the second-biggest) has opposed the move, with one of their arguments being that such an acquisition would allow Xbox to have an unfair monopoly on major brands like Call of Duty – giving them the power to withhold future sequels in that and other series from Sony's PlayStation platforms (where they've generated tons of cash over the years).

So Phil publicly tweeting that he wants Call of Duty to be on Nintendo's machines for the next 10 years is kind of him continuing the chummy relationship that Microsoft and Nintendo have enjoyed in recent years, but is mostly just a shot fired back at Sony. He's saying, "See? We won't keep Call of Duty all to ourselves! Why don't you just go ahead and let us finalize this whole merger thing, huh?"

If it does go through, the merger is set to conclude this June. And, since Phil has kind of locked himself into it now, Call of Duty development for the Switch (or the Switch's successor) would probably get rolling in earnest soon thereafter. **– LUCAS**

"This whole situation is kind of like being a kid caught in the crossfire between two bickering parents. I'm not sure it will amount to anything, but maybe Call of Duty really will get new games on Nintendo machines? We'll see!"
– LUCAS



Miyamoto Celebrated

The Father of Mario has just turned 70 years old!

AS WE CELEBRATE the 10th anniversary of our humble gaming rag, another far more significant milestone also deserves our attention. That's right! Shigeru Miyamoto hit the big 7-0 on November 16, 2022 – and aside from a touch of gray, he looks like he's barely aged from the moment he came out swinging at the E3 2004 Twilight Princess reveal!

Mario's Papa has had quite the distinguished career at Nintendo for over 45 years! Of course, any gaming aficionado worth their salt would already be well-versed in his legendary contributions, so there's no need to retread old ground. Let's instead recap what the man has been up to since assuming the role of "Creative Fellow" in 2015.

Mr. Miyamoto may no longer work directly in game development, yet he continues to offer his sage knowledge and advice to the younger designers at Nintendo. With the company's future in the capable hands of a new generation, he's been free to spearhead non-gaming ventures – particularly Super Nintendo World and The Super Mario Bros. Movie. He's worked closely with Universal on both projects, overseeing construction of the park in Universal Studios Japan and co-producing the new film (to avoid another disaster like Mario's last trip to the cinema).

Though fan responses to these endeavors have been extremely positive, Miyamoto's own reactions outshine them all – you've never seen a bigger smile than when he led viewers on a tour of Super Nintendo World prior to its grand opening in early 2021 or introduced the latest Mario movie trailer. Here's a visionary who's seen his creations evolve in ways he never could've imagined – you best believe he's allowed to let his pride shine through! Our caps off to you, Shigeru Miyamoto, and to all your proud moments to come! **– TONY**

Naka Arrested

The Father of Sonic has just been sent to jail.

KNOW WHO ISN'T having a proud moment right now? That would be Yuji Naka, former head of Sega's Sonic Team and lead programmer for the Sonic the Hedgehog Genesis trilogy. The man who once led the charge against Nintendo's mighty plumber during the '90s was arrested for insider trading. Twice! First on November 18, 2022, then again three weeks later when new allegations emerged!

Remember when Naka joined Square Enix in 2018 to direct a new 3D platformer called Balan Wonderworld, only to resign in April 2021 after the game bombed hard? During his tenure, he caught wind that studios Aiming and Ateam were contracted to develop free-to-play mobile titles Dragon Quest Tact and Final Fantasy VII: The First Soldier, respectively. Before any news was publicly announced, however, he purchased Aiming stock worth 2,800,000 yen (about $20,000) and Ateam stock worth 140,000,000 yen (about $1,000,000)! He wasn't alone – another ex-Square Enix employee named Taisuke Sasaki and his acquaintance Fumiaki Suzuki were also involved in this scheme – yet all were hoping to score a payday when those companies' stock prices inevitably rose.

In the end, it's Naka's participation that's most notable, marking an end to a once-lauded career that had been sloping downward since his departure from Sega in 2006. The Square Enix deal seemed like the start of a comeback, only to crash following Balan's poor reception and subsequent lawsuit alleging he was forcefully removed as director six months prior to release. And now we learn he tried to line his pockets through unethical means, all while painting himself as a victim? In the words of a certain blue hedgehog, "That's no good!" **– TONY**

Joyful Holidays

Super Nintendo World offers festive merch.

WHEN NINTENDO FIRST released art of Snowman Mario a few years back, I simply melted. I dreamt of merchandise for the frosty friend, but figured it was a pipe dream. Then last year's Jakks Pacific character-a-day advent calendar featured a figure of Snowman Mario alongside Santa Mario and Snowman Luigi as exclusive figures. Still, I always thought it would work better as a plush. This year has just that — a giant Snowman Mario plush — set as the premiere item kicking off the Joyful Holidays merchandise line that was released over the holiday season at Universal Studios Japan's Super Nintendo World shops. A plush wreath featuring Mario was also released with an avalanche of other goods: Snow-covered Question Block storage cubes, charms, earrings, mugs, several ornaments, clothing, slippers, pouches and various stationery items line the shelves at the exclusive shops. It's an extensive amount of goods for a seasonal promotion! There's a hairband with two Snowman Marios attached to it for maximum goofiness, and a fully decorated mini faux tree with a Snowman Mario ornament and a Super Star topper. The park even has a station to crush a coin into a Snowman Mario souvenir! I can't wait for the U.S. park!

Have a Mouthful

Kirby's shapeshifted into stuffed form this time.

MOUTHFUL MODE IN Kirby and the Forgotten Land was a total blast to experience, and it's obvious San-ei had fun with it too because they've decided to make a whole mess of plushes featuring many of the forms. The first set has Car Kirby, Cone Kirby, Vending Kirby and Bulb Kirby. (Just to be super cool, San-ei has added glow-in-the-dark fabric to the Bulb Kirby.) Car Kirby comes in regular, tiny and giant sizes, with the tiny version adding a pull ring that makes it move! The giant version appears to be several feet long.

For those keeping track, there are also regular Kirby plushes mixed into this set, including Wise Waddle Dee, Worried Waddle Dee, Ranger Kirby and Drill Kirby, Sleeping Kirby and Hammer Kirby. This line will also be a part of San-ei's Kirby All-Star line, so they will all be numbered. This line already includes an Awoofy, Elfilin and Bandana Waddle Dee from Forgotten Land.

Another set features Ring Mouth Kirby, but they put a mirror in the gap to make it more functional. Pipe Kirby is also set to release, and in this case San-ei has stuffed a Kirby-themed blanket inside the pipe, making it the cutest blanket storage item I've ever seen!

Another set of four smaller strap plushes have also been released with the Car, Cone, Vending and Bulb forms, but those are not from San-ei.

BY BRETT MARTIN

CURATED CRATES

Crack open CultureFly's latest boxes of goodies.

THREE NEW COLLECTOR boxes have been released from CultureFly, with two being Mario-themed and the other having goodies based on The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild.

The two Mario ones have retro-themed items straight from Super Mario Bros. on NES, with above ground and underground themes. The above ground set has a pipe blanket, 8-bit Mario figure, notebook with block pen, Toad and Mario pins and a Goomba plush. The underground box has a Bowser 8-bit figure, a grey pipe blanket, a themed glass, Bowser and Peach pins and a Grey Goomba plush.

The Zelda box contains a messenger bag that has the Traveler's Shield on it, while a lunch bag, planter and iron-on patch all feature the Hylian Crest. A notebook with a map of Hyrule is also included, and there's a multitool made to look like the Sheikah Slate.

All three can be found at Target stores, or CultureFly.com!

STUNNING STATUES

More iconic immortalizations from First 4 Figures.

FIRST 4 FIGURES' sack of goodies is stuffed this year. Mipha is still in the wings, and both Mipha and Urbosa have exclusive versions available on the F4F site for $125 and $150 respectively. Somehow Urbosa went out the door before Mipha, even though Mipha was announced long ago!

King Dedede actually has four versions to discuss. An exclusive version of the traditional design comes with a gold-plated coin for $10 more than the standard edition, priced at $460. F4F also made a Masked Dedede set of statues. They feature a mechanical hammer and the mask, and the exclusive comes with a masked coin design unique to this set, again for $470. A bundle features both exclusives for $900.

If your wallet isn't thoroughly wrecked after that, there's also the releases of Amy Rose and Zero from Mega Man X to consider! Amy has three versions, with the exclusive adding an Amy Rose Chao arm swap ($500), and the definitive adding an expanded base and more Chao in addition to all the other features of the lesser models for $550. Zero has six versions: the regular and light-up exclusive costing $650 and the definitive adding a Z-Saber and Sigma parts for $725, with each version offered in traditional red or "upgraded" black versions.

Oh yeah, and there's also a life-size Amaterasu bust from Okami at $710 ($750 exclusive with lighting effects) or a Chibiterasu vs. Dark Chibiterasu diorama statue from Okamiden for $485!

The Very Best, Like No One Ever Was

After 25 years, Ash Ketchum has become the Pokémon World Champion!

THREE YEARS AGO, I declared victory for Ash Ketchum. He became the Champion of the Alola region at the end of the Sun & Moon-inspired arc of the long-running anime series, and after coming up short in all six of his previous regional tournaments, seeing him finally claim a first-place prize seemed like it could be the culmination of his decades-long quest to be the very best.

But he had another mountain to climb! Over the last three years, Ash has been on a mission to challenge and defeat the undefeated Leon: the Champion of Galar, first introduced to us in Pokémon Sword & Shield.

Rather than taking a traditional path – setting off on a normal journey through Galar and earning Badges – Ash instead only spent a part of his time in the newest region during this latest anime arc. Instead, he teamed up with a new character named Goh and flew all around the Pokémon world, catching Pokémon and facing new challenges in different places in every episode. It was a deviation from the norm, but it served to celebrate the entire history of the series as it built toward its 25th anniversary. And the cherry on top of it all: the World Coronation Series tournament, packed with Champions!

Ash's status as the Champion of Alola got his foot in the door of this global tournament of top-tier Trainers, and after rising in the rankings for several years, he made the cut for the Final Eight. The other opponents there included Cynthia, the Sinnoh Champ; Steven, the best from Hoenn; Lance, the Dragon-type master representing both Kanto and Johto and even Ash's old traveling companion Iris, who had become the Champion of Unova!

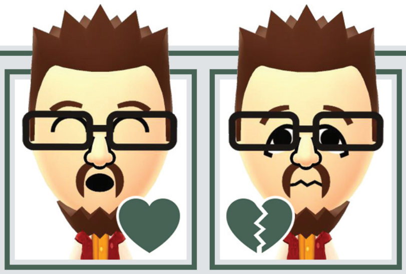
Of course, sitting at the #1 spot and looming over them all was Leon, the one Champion who had never lost a battle before. Ash was determined to be the one to hand him his first loss!

. . . And (spoiler, I guess), he did it! The World Coronation Series did end up finishing with the long-awaited face-off between Ash and Leon, and with the help of his Ultimate team of Pikachu, Gengar, Dragonite, Lucario, Sirfetch'd and Dracovish, he won! (A nice mix of old-school favorites and brand-new Pokémon there.)

Of course, this victory has only aired in Japan so far. We'll still have to wait a little longer for the official English dub to be completed! But keep an eye on Netflix, as that's where you'll ultimately be able to watch the conclusion to Ash's Ultimate Journey.

Where will he go next? **– LUCAS**

Great!
Ash Ketchum is officially the #1 Trainer in Pokémon!



Oh.
Hopefully they don't retire him from the show.

FORECAST

A meteorological look at the biggest game and DLC releases currently scheduled to debut in the next few months.

WHILE THE WINTER winds make spending time getting active outside less appealing, why not take the opportunity to exercise your mind with some prolonged indoor strategy sessions? The fires of Fire Emblem will burn once more beginning January 20, as the new adventure of Engage officially begins on the Switch. Get your brain prepped for its fresh take on turn-based tactics by turning to our new preview beginning on Page 44!

IF THE STRATEGY and story of Fire Emblem end up being a little too heavy to endure without taking a break, there's a reprieve on the way on the last day of January: the lighthearted platforming fun of SpongeBob SquarePants: The Cosmic Shake! This is an all-new adventure conceived as a spiritual sequel to Battle for Bikini Bottom. See Page 54!

THE SERIES THAT fuses Square Enix soundtracks with rhythm action gameplay is making a comeback, and also making its first appearance on a home console! Theatrhythm Final Bar Line will throw open the curtains on February 16 on the Switch. It'll focus most of its attention on songs and scenes drawn out of the Final Fantasy series, but some other games will get represented in the setlist too! See more about it on Page 49.

IF YOU'VE FINISHED playing Trails from Zero and you need another RPG adventure starring a guy named Lloyd, look no further than this remastered version of Tales of Symphonia, due to debut on February 17! (Then you'll have about a month until Trails Lloyd takes the baton back from Tales Lloyd in Trails to Azure on March 14.) More on Page 48!

THOUGH ITS NAME still seems incredibly odd nearly half a decade later, 2018's Octopath Traveler nevertheless established itself as an instant classic, and its unique HD-2D art style has inspired several other series since. Finally, though, Octopath itself is getting a direct sequel on February 24! We take a first look at the new set of eight different path-taking travelers over on Pages 52 and 53.

AN ENTIRE CALENDAR year has come and gone since this game's originally planned December 2021 release date, and we've sadly still heard no new news. Some thought it might be dropped into stores with little fanfare in December 2022, but alas – still nothing. Now the question becomes whether we'll ever see it, or if it will be permanently canned.

> Long-awaited sequels, epic role-playing quests, a little bit of music and a cartoony adventure to take the edge off – this winter on the Switch is shaping up to be a warm and welcoming one! 2023 is just getting started, too, as now that the calendar's flipped into another new year, we're not too far away from massively anticipated titles like The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom! This should be a great year for Switch fans! – **LUCAS**

FIRE EMBLEM ENGAGE EXPANSION PASS

WHEN IT COMES to DLC, I've been a fan (and defender) of Nintendo's approach for years now – but I do have to register a complaint with the timing of this latest Expansion Pass: It's a little grimy.

The Fire Emblem Engage Expansion Pass will be available as of January 20 – the same day the main game goes on sale. That would be fine if it were just open for pre-orders that day, but it's actually launching Wave 1 of its content that day too! Longtime legacy character Tiki will be a new Emblem summon in battle for Pass purchasers, as will the Three Houses trio of Claude, Dimitri and Edelgard (who all share a single slot and will only be summonable as a set of three). A few other in-game items will be available as part of Wave 1 as well.

. . . That doesn't sit well with me. DLC feels OK when a base game is a full, completed experience, and then the devs dive back in after it's on sale and craft some extra content for it. Or they at least space out the rollout better than this! Day 1 DLC says to fans "We could have put this in the base game, but we wanted to charge you more for it." It could be a costly error for Nintendo! (Or maybe nobody will care.)

The eShopocalypse is Upon Us!

Over a decade after they opened, the 3DS and Wii U digital storefronts are about to be shuttered.

I WAS SITTING in a hotel lobby in Los Angeles when the 3DS eShop went live.

It was back in my IGN days, a little over a year before work would begin on NF. I was in California to help cover that year's E3 Expo, which was set to officially kick off the following day: June 7, 2011. Nintendo was getting their show going a little early by timing the launch of their latest digital storefront to happen less than 24 hours earlier.

The higher-ups on the IGN Nintendo team were busy with E3 prep, and getting early access to press-only demos "behind closed doors" that day. So it fell to me, the man a little lower on the totem pole, to cover the launch of the shop and its initial selection of downloadable wares.

Which was hard to do from a hotel lobby.

I remember struggling for an hour or so to get my 3DS linked up to the hotel's spotty WiFi long enough to access the shop, but once I finally did, I was delighted! I was able to buy and download the first three Game Boy titles of the new Virtual Console lineup – Super Mario Land, Alleyway and Radar Mission – as well as the new 3D Classics remake of Excitebike, which was free for the eShop's first month!

I had been IGN's Virtual Console reviewer through the Wii era, and a lot of the DSi's digital releases went to me as well – it was exhilirating to be at the beginning of another new chapter in that saga.

. . . And now that same chapter is just about to end. It's kind of odd to have lived through another entire era like this. Yes, we've gone through a lot of hardware generations, but when those end it feels different – those are always slow fades as the next system steps into the spotlight. For eShops, though, Nintendo sets a defined date when they're just done – and that's it. A whole library of games, gone.

So it is that I implore you once more to grab the best games from the 3DS and Wii U eShops before that day comes. Because it's coming soon! This March! (We don't know exactly which day in March, so just assume March 1 and move fast!)

Here is our final set of recommendations for you, our readers, as we prepare to close the book on another of Nintendo's digital eras. Two, in fact!

My first Wii U eShop experience, by the way, was downloading games with my just-turned-1-year-old son Carter. That was a lot more fun than sitting alone in LA and fighting to connect to that terrible hotel WiFi. **– LUCAS**

RHYTHM HEAVEN MEGAMIX

THIS STRANGE SIBLING to the WarioWare series was once a top seller in Japan! Blending microgame style with infectiously catchy tunes made for an experience that's much larger than the sum of its parts, but for a variety of reasons, the Rhythm Heaven series has since sputtered out.

If the series really is over, then this Megamix collection is a fitting swan song. Containing levels from all three previous iterations of the franchise, plus some all-new songs and games (and more than a few WarioWare crossovers), this is a true love letter to a certain kind of weird Nintendo game that may now be extinct. Though this compilation was released physically in Japan and Europe, the eShop is the only way to get it in the United States, so pick it up and catch the beat while you still can! **– JONATHAN**

JUNE 2016

THE PUSHMO GAMES

AS I JUST recounted above, the 3DS eShop got its start in mid-2011 – but it was a remarkably slow start. Unique, exclusive "3DSWare" releases were few and far between for the rest of the year, and things were looking grim . . . until Pushmo appeared! A wholly original platformer/puzzler developed by Intelligent Systems (about a year before their Fire Emblem efforts began to bear fruit again), Pushmo was colorful, captivating and just the killer app the 3DS eShop desperately needed as that system headed into its first holiday season.

Even better: Pushmo was not a one-off! It got a sequel called Crashmo the following year, then another called Stretchmo in 2015. There was even a Wii U version called Pushmo World! All four of those games are about to evaporate from availability, so if you have any love for puzzlers at all, I wholeheartedly recommend checking out at least the first one: the original Pushmo. Then, if you fall in love, you can go back and grab the rest of the bunch! **– LUCAS**

2011 THROUGH 2015

AMIIBO TAP: NINTENDO'S GREATEST BITS

ALL AMIIBO-EXCLUSIVE CONTENT is stuck in a "darned if you do, darned if you don't" situation. If it's not good, people will mock it. If it's *too* good, many will cry foul over major portions of a game being walled off behind a potentially rare toy purchase! One way out of this catch-22 is to just start giving things away, and that's exactly what Nintendo did with amiibo Tap: Nintendo's Greatest Bits. Released around the same time as the excellent NES Remix games, this free app allows you to play random segments of 30 different classic games: 22 from the NES and eight from SNES. Like the classic Play-Choice arcade titles of Nintendo past, you can only play each game for a limited time (three minutes) before you have to scan another amiibo and see which game it summons up for you. It's essentially a way to demo games on the Virtual Console, and a special way to make the most of your toy collection. **— JONATHAN**

APRIL 2015

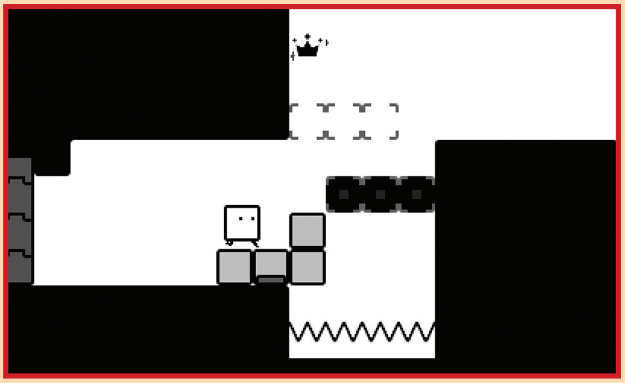
THE MARIO VS. DONKEY KONG ESHOP GAMES

DID YOU KNOW that over half of the entire Mario vs. Donkey Kong franchise is just about to turn into digital dust? It's true: Of the seven games in this series, only three have received physical releases. Four different sequels are about to be delisted!

2009's Minis March Again! was made for DSiWare, but got a second chance in the 3DS eShop when the DSi's digital storefront shut down years ago. It's on the edge of extinction again! Then there's 2013's Minis on the Move, which gave the normally 2D series a 3D makeover for the 3DS' special stereoscopic screen. Tipping Stars (seen above) launched on both Wii U and 3DS in 2015, and Mini Mario & Friends: amiibo Challenge followed it one year later, also in both shops.

So if you're a fan of this puzzling, Lemmings-like series in the slightest, you're on the clock to complete a full collection! **— LUCAS**

2009 THROUGH 2016



THE BOXBOY! GAMES

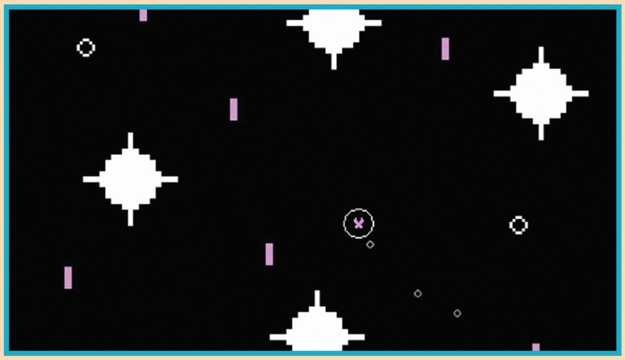
WHILE HAL LABORATORY is and probably always will be best known for the Kirby series, I personally believe the best series their studio has ever produced is BOXBOY! It's a travesty that three of its games are about to go offline.

The original BOXBOY! launched in 2015 and introduced the world to Qbby, a simple white box with eyes and stubby legs who has the power to manifest more boxes out of his body. You make platforms to cross over spike traps, staircases to reach taller platforms and much, much more. It's a perfect puzzler.

In 2016, its sequel BOXBOXBOY! doubled Qbby's power, letting him make and set one sequence of boxes, then make and set a second. Twice the complexity!

Then 2017's BYE-BYE BOXBOY! seemed like it was the series' finale, but thankfully it was only the conclusion of the 3DS trilogy. We got one more game on the Switch in 2019 – but it's about to be the only one left! Move fast and download all three of Qbby's 3DS eShop adventures while you can! **— LUCAS**

2015 THROUGH 2017



DAIKON SET

THE Wii U ESHOP served as the host of loads of bizarre, low-budget indie titles that went largely overlooked throughout the system's actual lifespan. Many of them stretched themselves beyond their means and ended up being pretty messy. Daikon Set is the opposite of that: Its simple, clean approach to design will be welcoming and approachable to everyone who likes moving pixels around on a screen. And best of all, it's 100% free!

This "set" is made up of three separate little games: Chroma Star (a single-screen shmup with color-matching elements), Pink Mite (a bouncy underwater obstacle course adventure) and The Queen (a sort of anti-Pong where you move a stick to avoid hitting bouncing squares). Developer Butterfly clearly had big plans for these little games – they even continued a few of them on the 3DS eShop.

If you like the Bit.Trip series and/or pre-NES era gaming, Daikon Set (and the whole Butterfly gameography) is more than worth setting up. **— JONATHAN**

JUNE 2017

You Know the Drill

Burrow your way to victory in Pepper Grinder.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE between a game that you lose interest in after a few minutes and an adventure that you can't put down? Momentum! The optimistic energy that it takes to invest your time and attention into anything will either wither, or grow while in the midst of it. Without that build of excitement, we won't go on – and Pepper Grinder has this sort of kinetic joy in spades.

It's also taken a lot of energy to keep development of the game going! Created by Riv Hester, Pepper Grinder was first announced in 2017, and it's already an award winner. That was the year it won Intel's "Level Up" contests for Best Use of Physics and Best Platformer, and it's only gotten bigger and better since then.

The premise of the game is simple: dive into and out of the sand using your trusty drill (named "Grinder") to get your stolen treasure back from hordes of monster pirates! Along the way you'll grab a Gatling gun, ride a snowmobile, pilot a giant robot, launch from cannons and battle giant beetles!

Where did all these ideas come from? Dig Dug, Ecco the Dolphin and Donkey Kong Country were all big influences, which is really saying something. You couldn't ask for three classic 2D action games that are more different from each other! Dig Dug offers a specific tactile sensation when the dirt pushes back against you; Ecco is largely non-violent, but still ultra exciting due to its slick game feel; and Donkey Kong Country is a veritable smorgasbord of platforming design ideas. Drilling down on the best elements of this unlikely trio into one cohesive whole was no small feat!

What's most surprising is, as far as we've heard, Sonic the Hedgehog wasn't a direct influence on the game. Watching the trailer evokes heavy Sonic vibes (but in the Mania way, not the Forces way). While Sonic might spin dash to suddenly blast forward, Pepper and Grinder dig into the earth to build their speed, then burst from the ground with an intense groundswell of power – flying through the air ends up being just as important as drilling through the dirt!

Plowing through collectables, enemies and who knows what else will be a real Pop Rock Candy treat when Pepper Grinder finally arrives in the Switch eShop sometime later in 2023. **– JONATHAN**

Role-Playing in the Ring

WrestleQuest mashes up pro wrestling with RPG progression.

WHATCHA GONNA DO, Nintendomaniacs, when WrestleQuest runs wild on Switch?

Shown briefly during the recent Nintendo Indie World Showcase, WrestleQuest is not your typical wrestling-based video game. While some video game developers try to recreate the sports entertainment spectacle through simulation and others attempt to emulate the over-the-top performances through arcade action, WrestleQuest's team sets their game apart through turn-based RPG gameplay.

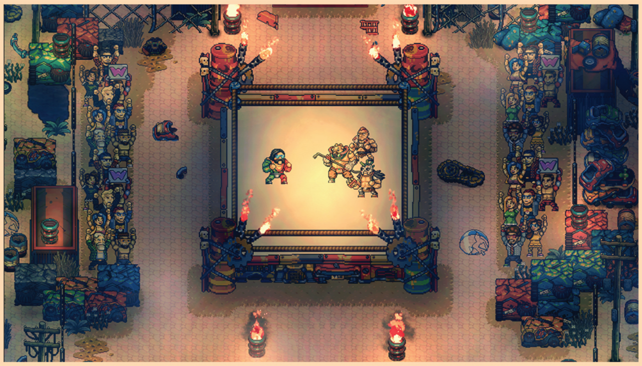
It's all about the hero's journey, as you take control of an aspiring rookie named Randy "Muchacho Man" Santos, and guide him to the top of the wrestling world, where he can become a true superstar. You'll train, learn, glam and, of course, slam your way through various match types and opponents, ranging from your run-of-the-mill faces and heels to lizards, robots and more. You'll also form alliances with others, allowing you to go for tag team and trios glory.

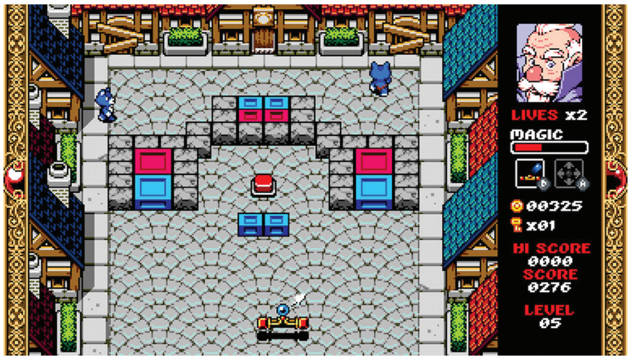
You'll encounter others with similar aspirations, such as Neon Gravebird, a small-timer who's caught between a surfer and goth gimmick (and reminds us of a certain Icon . . .), the wealthy gatorskin shoe-wearing Dash Talent and Seismic Thunder, who is part of the weather-based stable Cold Front, just to name a few.

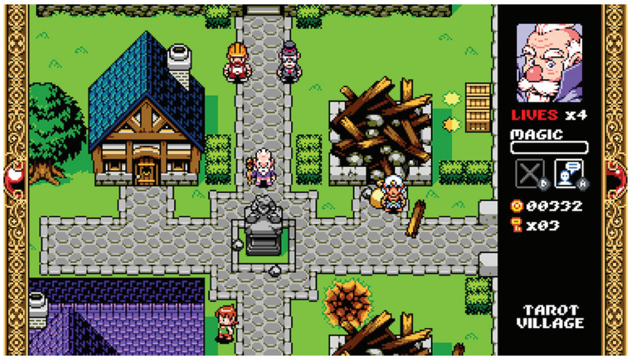
It's not all jobbers and journeymen, though – you'll also be facing off against some of the greatest legends to ever set foot in the squared circle. Names such as Sgt. Slaughter, Road Warriors Hawk and Animal (a.k.a. The Legion of Doom), Jake "The Snake" Roberts, "Eighth Wonder of the World" Andre the Giant, "The Last Outlaw" Jeff Jarrett and, of course, the seeming inspiration behind Santos' decision to lace up the boots and step into the ring: "Macho Man" Randy Savage. And you won't just be stepping up to these legends (and many more), but also exploring worlds based on their storied careers.

Of course, as with any good role-playing game, you'll be able to enjoy some level of customization as you aspire to new heights. You can choose your moves, your style, your taunts and even your entrance! After all, even the all-time greats have had to refresh some part of their gimmick every now and then.

WrestleQuest is booked to hit the ring in May 2023, and looks to be a slobber-knocker worthy of any wrestling fan. Dig it? **– DAVID**







Delayed by a Decade

WIZORB

TEN YEARS IS how long it's been since we first started publishing this magazine, and it's also about how long I've been waiting for this game to be ported to a Nintendo platform!

Wizorb was a peanut butter & chocolate pioneer over a decade ago. It first appeared as an Xbox Live Indie Game in late 2011, where its unique mashup of role-playing ideas with Breakout clone gameplay earned it a lot of attention! For the time, at least. Indie games weren't nearly as big a business back then as they are now, and its intentionally retro visual style was also a rarity!

It rode its early recognition into a couple of PC platform ports, then landed on a few other systems over the following years, like the short-lived Ouya. But never any machine in Nintendo's neck of the woods! It would've been perfect on Wii U, or 3DS. Alas, we've had to wait until now to finally get our fix on Switch!

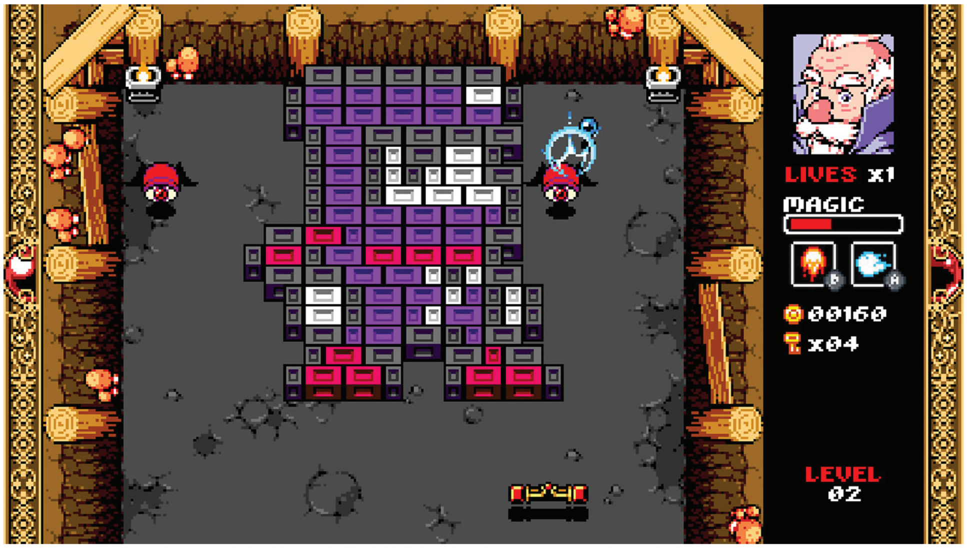
Wizorb presents gauntlets of block-breaking action. You control a paddle at the bottom of the screen and must keep a bouncing ball from falling out of the playing field, constantly moving left and right to hit it back up to break more blocks. That's classic Breakout/Arkanoid stuff.

But then the wizarding half of Wizorb enters the equation with the magic spells that our hero, Cyrus, can cast. With a tap of B, you can blast a fireball up from the paddle to directly attack a block – or roaming monster – without having to wait for the bouncing ball to make contact with it instead. You can also conjure gusts of wind to influence the ball's trajectory to the left or right. And if some corner of the current screen is really giving you trouble, with blocks that you just can't quite reach no matter what angles you use when ricocheting the ball, you can teleport the odd orb right next to them. (But only after you lose a life.)

That'll happen frequently. Wizorb is tough, and losses can happen fast – but the game is also generous with extra lives, so the difficulty usually seems to balance out. I've had plenty of moments of frustration when playing through – especially since you have to clear 12 screens in a row, then beat a boss – but after using a continue or two and catching my breath, I've always been able to make it through.

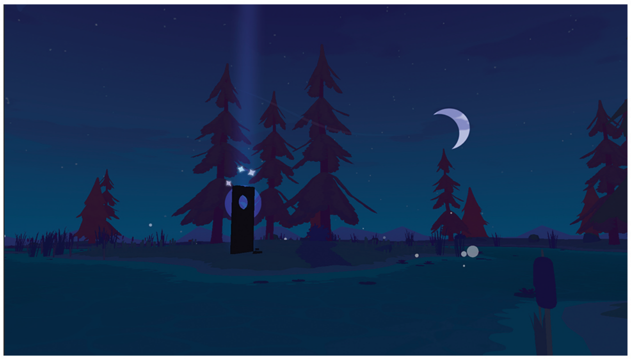
Beyond the action levels, there's a little hub village that you can bring earned gold back to in order to rebuild broken buildings. Doing so nets you rewards like further extra lives, so it's worth investing in the reconstruction efforts!

The team that created Wizorb at Tribute Games have gone on to great things in the last 10 years, springboarding off this project and ending up making great pixel-art games like Flinthook and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge! It's fun to be able to turn back the clock and revisit some of their earlier work, especially when you can tell that their talent was already firmly established even in 2011. Wizorb's also a cheap purchase – its MSRP is just $4.99, and it's also sometimes on sale even cheaper – so it makes for a perfect impulse buy! **– LUCAS**



8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: TRIBUTE GAMES RATING: E



Stars in the Swamp

PARADISE MARSH

UNDER THE WEIGHT of adult responsibilities, I'm disinclined to begin any new task that isn't a step toward a long-term goal. This frame of mind even affects how I consume video games – I carve through my monstrous backlog under the misguided notion that clearing it will transform me into a paragon of media literacy. Free time is just another obligation to fulfill. Perhaps I've forgotten how to "live in the moment."

Montreal-based game developer Étienne Trudeau wanted to remind folks like me of the simple pleasures when he created Paradise Marsh, in which you interact with objects that serve no purpose other than to be amusing. Surrounded by marshland that extends infinitely in every direction, you're free to catch dragonflies and frogs, build a snowman, hop across lily pads or warm your hands over a campfire, all while coming to grips with the impermanence of life and the realization that experiences are valuable precisely because they're fleeting.

There is an ultimate objective, should you choose to pursue it: You've accidentally knocked the stars out of the night sky, and you must collect a variety of fauna with your net to repopulate the heavens. These stars form constellations modeled after the critters you've gathered, each possessing consciousness and a quirky personality. From a cricket obsessed with conspiracy theories to a tadpole who speaks using zoomer lingo, they encourage you in their unique manner to restore their grandeur and take your place alongside them in the cosmos.

Of course, when you do that is entirely up to you. Before you lies a procedurally generated paradise of biomes based on the four seasons, rendered in purposefully low resolution to evoke nostalgia for an earlier age. You're enveloped by soothing tones from Richard "Disasterpeace" Vreeland, the famed composer of such titles as Fez and Hyper Light Drifter, while birds you meet recite insightful poetry. Take a seat on a nearby bench and watch as time slips by at an accelerated pace, highlighting the paradox of a world that's both static and ever-changing.

Sounds like Paradise Marsh is the perfect avenue to appreciate the here and now without worry of what's to come, yes? However, in the two hours I spent during an initial session, then an hour and change during a replay, I didn't feel at ease like I should have. I wondered how this could be – until my thoughts landed upon the list of in-game achievements.

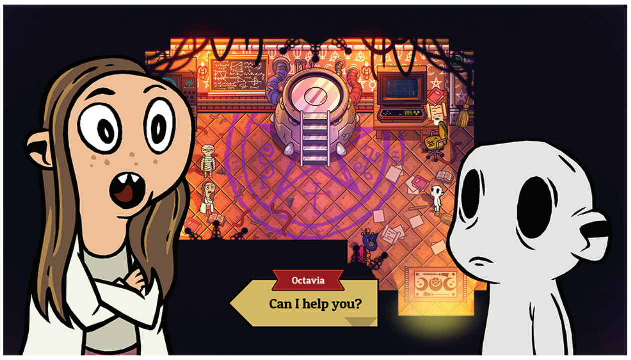
Then I remarked, "Why does this game have achievements to begin with?" Activities such as plucking flower petals while reciting "he loves me, he loves me not" or eating assorted mushrooms to learn what temporary abilities they grant are indexed right there, implying that these otherwise organic moments aren't so much chance diversions as they are completion criteria.

Does pursuing completion targets satisfy the corner of my brain that craves order and perfection? Sure! But a major tenet of Paradise Marsh is that life is more enjoyable when you engage in pastimes that are ends in themselves. By laying out a discrete list of what you can do, the game dispels the illusion of emergent discovery and reveals a purely linear experience with an unequivocal beginning and end. The game would have been a fuller experience if that aspect were absent.

Individuals who can effortlessly slip in and out of relaxation will find it a thought-provoking playground, but if you're like me, Paradise Marsh may wind up just another item cleared from your backlog. **– TONY**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: ÉTIENNE TRUDEAU RATING: E

6.5



Become a Real Somebody

NOBODY SAVES THE WORLD

YOU'VE ALREADY PLAYED Nobody Saves The World.

Or, at least, you've played a game that's functionally identical. Cut from very familiar cloth, Drinkbox Studio's action RPG involves exploring a fantasy world in a top-down 2D environment, stumbling across hidden secrets and battling through dungeons. Basically, it's Zelda – but it's in good company. There are an increasing number of these top-down action RPGs in the eShop.

This, indeed, is the central premise of Nobody Saves the World. Yes, it is tremendously generic – that's the joke. You've played multiple games like this before, and the game knows it. What sets this one apart is that you play *every* generic Zelda-like *at the same time.*

The eponymous hero, a literal blank slate named Nobody, has the power to transform into dozens of action heroes. Will you try being a strong knight? An archer, or a magician? Or will you go for something weirder? A terrifying toothy mermaid? A turtle? A rotting zombie, or a literal egg?

Each form has its own signature skills, and abilities can be mixed and matched to get the most from your growing collection of characters.

With so many forms to try out, the game does its absolute best to convince you to spend time with each of them. Progression is tied not to leveling up, but to earning points from completing challenges set for each different form. Kill 50 enemies using the strongman's dumbbells: earn a point. Get enough points and the next big dungeon will unlock.

The *problem* is that the larger story quickly becomes superfluous next to the more pressing issue of unlocking more forms and earning more points. The game *really* wants you to spend equal time with each of Nobody's unlockable forms, which feels frustrating once you've found one that really clicks with you.

This isn't a game in which you find your own way to play and run with it. This is a game wherein you play the way you are told to play, and if you try to stick with a single form for too long, text boxes will appear on the screen telling you that you're playing it all wrong.

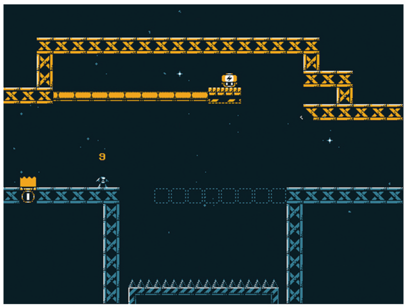
It doesn't help that the missions to earn points are painfully repetitive. Did you just kill 100 enemies using the turtle's bubble ability? Great! Now kill another *200!* Wash, rinse, repeat.

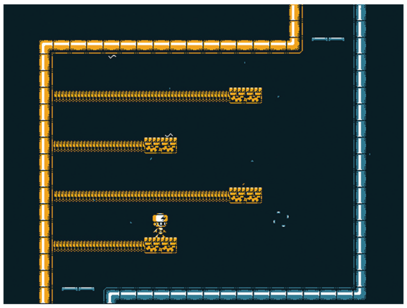
It should be noted that Nobody Saves the World is very well made. Its gross-out, colorful art style feels like a Cartoon Network (or perhaps Adult Swim) cartoon come to life. The writing is genuinely funny, parodying the standard, formulaic fantasy adventure plot that's typically found in these games, but with an extra layer of bite that you wouldn't find in a Nintendo title.

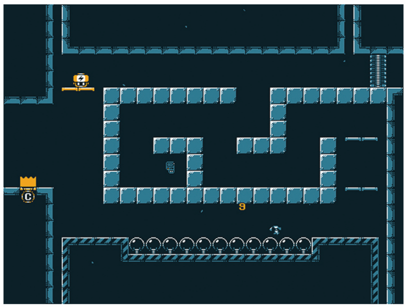
The problem, ultimately, is that Nobody Saves the World takes the joke a little too far, forcing the player to go through the same motions over and over, to the point where it feels like the game is laughing at you, rather than with you. It's a lot of fun, right up until the point where it becomes tedious. **— MATTHEW L.**

8.0

SWITCH
PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: DRINKBOX STUDIOS
RATING: T







Try Not to Lose Your Head!

ELECHEAD

EVERY ONCE IN a while I'll get around to finally playing a game that's been sitting in my backlog for a long time, and then I'll kick myself for not having made time for it right when it first launched. I have most recently kicked myself about ElecHead.

ElecHead is a spectacularly simple, immensely engaging puzzler and platformer. It first caught my eye years ago when Nama Takahashi, its lone developer, made a short demo available for free download on PC. It was only a few minutes long, but it was a wonderful proof of concept, and I was eager to see more! Thankfully he fleshed it out into a complete game, which hit the Switch last June.

In ElecHead, you control a robot with – you guessed it – an electrified head. Anything your head comes into contact with is instantly also charged with electrical energy, which means dormant platforms spring to life, lightning-spewing light bulbs switch on and even fireball-launching cannons activate themselves. Your task is to maneuver through a series of puzzle-packed rooms by sometimes taking advantage of the fact that your noggin is a portable generator, and other times taking care *not* to make contact with things that you *don't* want to turn on.

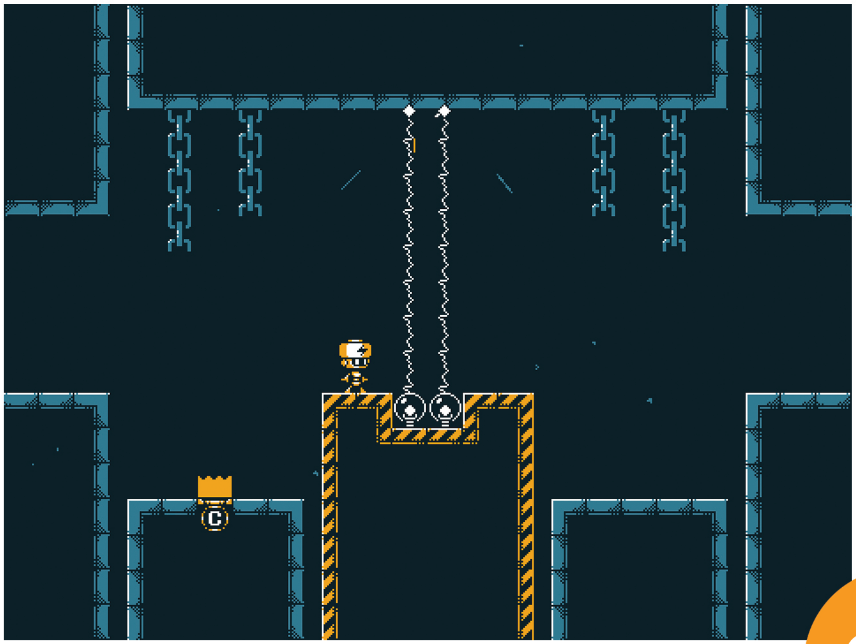
At first, these puzzles aren't too terribly tricky – the early screens serve as a tutorial, and you only need to worry about moving and jumping. But once you've got the basics down . . . you lose you head.

ElecHead's main gameplay mechanic is granted to you after the opening screens: You can remove your head from your body and toss it left, right or up, away from the rest of yourself! The puzzles that then fill the rest of the game are so perfectly inventive and interesting. Sometimes they're simple brainteasers, and other times they're on-the-clock platforming challenges, because your body only lasts for 10 seconds when separated from the head!

I had a blast figuring out each puzzle, and when I got stumped, my kids were often able to pinpoint the right set of actions to take instead! It's so satisfying to be confused, but then see someone have that "Eureka!" moment where the right thing to do just clicks. This is a great family game to grab for an afternoon of cooperative puzzle-solving!

. . . But probably just an afternoon. The only knock I have against ElecHead is that it's too short! It would've been great to be able to spend a little more time getting inside this bot's head. **– LUCAS**

SWITCH
PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NAMA TAKAHASHI
RATING: E10+



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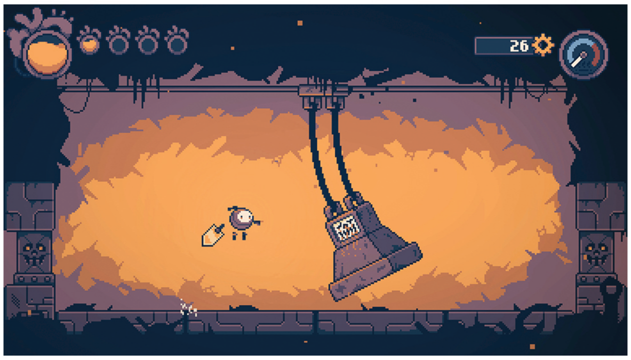
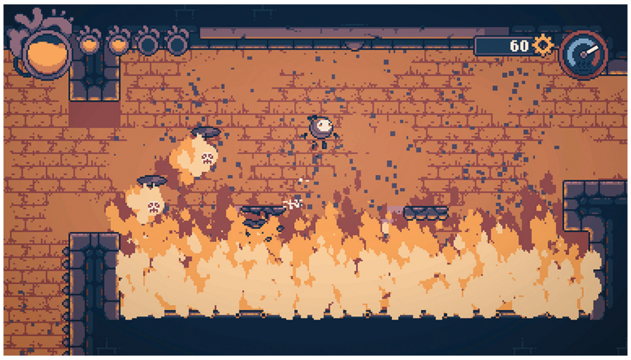




Poetry in Motion

HAIKU, THE ROBOT

THE SWITCH LIBRARY isn't exactly wanting for "search action" games. Some of the best in the genre are already readily available on the platform, and there seems to be a new one added to the list every week! It takes something truly special to stand out from the pack, and fortunately Haiku, the Robot has what it takes.

Haiku borrows liberally from the genre-defining legends that came before it. There's a short warp move that's a dead ringer for a similar ability in the original Axiom Verge. There's a literal Morph Ball from Metroid that lets you roll around to get into tight spaces. But the biggest inspiration here was clearly Hollow Knight – everything from the flow of the game's world to the way it controls feels extremely similar to Team Cherry's masterpiece, but with just enough of its own personality to feel unique.

Where Hollow Knight often only seemed monochromatic because of where that game took place, Haiku's lack of color diversity stems from its art direction. The game uses pixel art that elicits the feeling of playing on an older PC or even Super Game Boy, rarely allowing more than a few colors on-screen at a time, so when an image with more color does show up, it's usually pretty memorable.

Also like Hollow Knight, the game is littered with strange and charming characters who give you just enough information about the world to feel like there's a sprawling backstory that's barely out of your reach, while leaving the details vague enough to maintain the sense of foreboding that exists everywhere. Haiku takes place in a post-apocalyptic world where machines have inherited the Earth after humanity's extinction, and while there's plenty of adorable robots to be found, the sense of despair is ever-present.

Combat and control are nearly identical to Hollow Knight as well, including your character's weight, speed and fighting capabilities – which is to say everything feels extremely tight. There will rarely be a death in the game that feels like anything other than your own fault for not being able to execute what it was you were trying to do.

While this is all derivative of the best of what came before it, Haiku takes all of these elements and puts them together into a fantastic experience. It requires talent to emulate the best of the best and get it right, and this game does so with gusto.

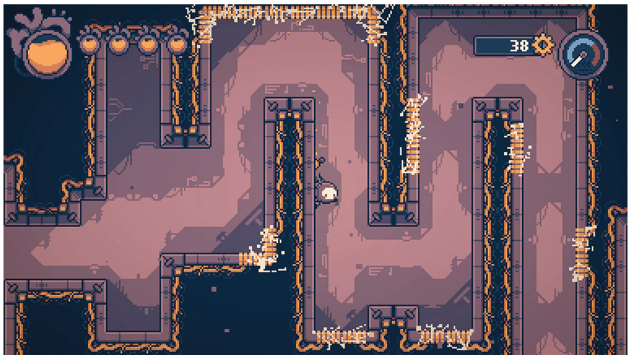
On the downside, the one area where Haiku felt truly lacking was in the music department. There's almost no actual music throughout the course of the entire game. Boss battles feature some invigorating tunes, and there are a few areas with some light musical themes, but the vast majority of Haiku takes place in relative silence. Ambient noise is just about all you get, and I found that really detracted from the experience. Since Haiku is pretty reserved in terms of usage of colors, the lack of any real music between areas sometimes made things blend together a bit too much, leaving longer play sessions feeling a little bland.

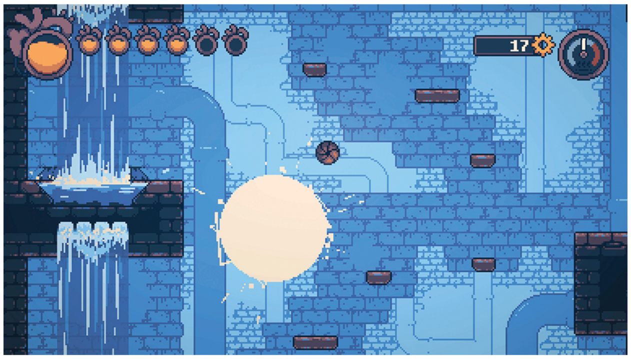
On the other hand, the world is a breeze to get through. While looking at the map it might seem like traveling from one area to another could take ages, but even if you choose not to use fast travel, things move at a brisk pace, always encouraging you to see what's around the next corner.

Haiku, the Robot is a fantastic take on a crowded genre. It's fast, challenging, charming and almost always fun to explore. It's not perfect, but it's earned its place among the greats in its class.
– KRIS

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: MISTERMORRISGAMES
RATING: E





A Mountain of Merriment . . . and More!

MARIO KART 8 DELUXE: BOOSTER COURSE PASS – WAVE 3

WE'VE ARRIVED AT the midpoint of the Booster Course Pass now, as with the December debut of Wave 3, 24 of the planned 48 additional DLC courses are now active in the game. And the latest eight are pretty great!

Though I suppose I should talk about the least interesting additions first. London Loop and Berlin Byways are two more tracks returning from the mobile Mario Kart Tour, and at this point I feel like I've already seen all there is to see from that style of course. They're all based on real-world cities, they all have you driving around on actual streets and past the occasional notable landmark. (This time we get sights like the Tower of London and the Berlin Wall – with a couple of chunks replaced by kart-smashing Whomps.) They all twist and turn, too, offering different routes for each lap. But they all feel too samey now. I've seen enough.

Alongside the pair of Tour tracks, we also get a couple of mountains: Rock Rock Mountain, returning from Mario Kart 7, and Merry Mountain, an all-new, Christmas-themed climb up a snow-covered cliffside. That one was perfectly timed for inclusion in this Wave (since it launched just a couple of weeks before the holiday it's based on), and it's a fun track with a whimsical flying train that zips around in the sky and has some Toads on board who toss coins out as "presents" for the racers. Rock Rock is the more memorable mountain for me, though, as it boasts what seems to be the steepest vertical ascent in the series so far – which you must attempt while also dodging the track's titular rolling rocks.

Speaking of having more than one of the same kind of setting, how about good old Rainbow Road? This Wave has added a fourth version of that classic course to 8 Deluxe: the Mario Kart 7 edition. It's different enough from 8's own Rainbow Road and the SNES and N64 versions that it can sit comfortably alongside all of them, thankfully, but as with the city tracks from Tour, I think I've seen enough of these by now, too.

. . . Has Nintendo doomed this game to repetition in its racetrack roster now? We still have three more DLC Waves to go, and with 72 tracks already in the game, the remaining two dozen will surely have to tread some of the same territory we've already explored before. It makes me a little worried for the year ahead!

Anywho, back to this Wave. The final three tracks are fan favorites Peach Gardens and Maple Treeway – both of which have been adapted well to the MK8 style – and my favorite revamp of this latest bunch, Boo Lake. It was originally a Game Boy Advance course and hasn't been seen since Super Circuit in 2001, so it had a lot of room for improvement.

And its new version is incredible! The total flatness of the GBA original has been replaced by a rollicking up-and-down dive into and out of the water of the haunted lake, like the old boardwalk has sunken into more disrepair over the years. It's great, and the highlight of this pack to me.

Finally, a non-track new feature! There's now a Custom Items menu that lets you pick and choose which items will appear during Vs. Races. You can finally get rid of Blue Shells – or crazily have nothing but them! (Almost.) It's a fun feature that adds just a bit more replayability to this nearly 9-year-old racer. **– LUCAS**

8.0

DLC PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E

SECOND OPINION

Three Years Later, a Second Look

MARIO KART TOUR

THE MOBILE-ONLY MARIO KART has gone through several changes since its launch in 2019, celebrating its third anniversary recently by adding Battle Mode, revamping its pay structure and removing much of the gacha-style gambling that made the game so frustrating when it first went live. But have those changes made it any better of a game?

Chris scored it as an abysmal 3/10 back in Issue #43 for its money-grabbing gambling, lame character additions and lack of multiplayer, as well as for forcing players to use specific characters on each cup's tracks. Well, characters still have favorite courses, which leads to locking players into playing characters they may not otherwise pick to get three item boxes and score more points – and it also still applies to some karts and gliders somehow performing better on certain tracks than others. This leads to some ugly combos, like Space Mario driving an ice cream cone with a candle glider.

Hilarity aside, this dynamic is frustrating when you don't have any of these "better" items and have to enter the shop.

Nintendo has removed the gacha element where players gambled Rubies by firing a pipe for a chance to win low-percentage loot, and now the pipes have randomized bonuses given for completing tasks. The shop is pricing high-end characters at 150 Rubies and each kart or glider at 100 Rubies. This is a better model, especially considering you had to often pay more than that to get the high-ends out of 100-item pipes.

Naturally there's a catch: Now Rubies are doled out less generously, and you only earn slightly more if you have the Gold Pass subscription (that inexplicably still exists). Coin Rush now costs Quick Tickets instead of Rubies, and coins are definitely more generous now. Doing the math, buying enough Rubies to get a character outright with no work will cost $69.99, which is ludicrous. Since the model nearly demands that you get high scores to keep your rank from tour to tour, it's enticing to pay – but just have patience. Nothing about this game is worth money and plenty can be done for free.

Lame character additions are still a thing, often adding a different color, gold version or some other superfluous outfit. Conversely I did enjoy Meowser and Kitsune Luigi, and the game has introduced King Bob-omb, Chargin' Chuck, Pauline and Kamek as drivers to the Kart series for the first time, while reintroducing Petey Piranha. Trying to keep up with buying and leveling all of these new characters is impossible, so pick a few and have fun.

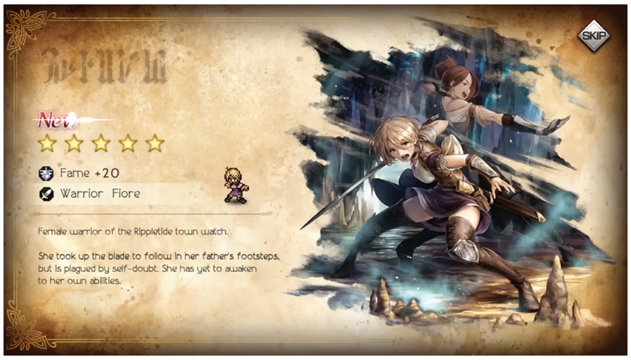
The multiplayer is now robust, fun and challenging. The game has daily challenges that take place on tracks from the tour and usually allow using any character you want, as tour rules often restrict characters to second-tier, opening up the roster. You can set up rooms for friends to play in privately or join them as you see them, and the new Battle Mode, while it had a very rocky rollout, is very fun and fresh-feeling. Bouncing a Bob-omb across some jelly in Cookie Land to nail an opponent without them seeing you is so utterly satisfying, and winning leads to more random pipe-firing goodies.

While it's still the most greedy game on my phone, Mario Kart Tour is something I can quickly play that generally gives me instant gratification. Don't let the pay structure get you down and resist paying through patience, and you can have dumbed-down karting fun too. **– BRETT**

3.0 CHRIS

6.5 BRETT

MOBILE PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E



The Mobile-Exclusive Adventure

OCTOPATH TRAVELER: CHAMPIONS OF THE CONTINENT

A PREQUEL TO Octopath Traveler, Champions of the Continent takes place three years before the events of that 2018 original adventure.

After your initial character (mine was Gilderoy, the merchant) is saved from certain death in a blizzard, they are appointed the Chosen One, holder of the ring of Aelfric, one of Orsterra's gods. There are seven other rings that have fallen into evil hands, and alongside party members "guided" through the game's gacha mechanic, you will save those who have fallen under the corrupt influence of those villainous ring bearers.

Each character you draw has their own sidequests to take as well, while the main quest involves a young architect restoring a deserted town to its former glory.

The eight character classes now have class-specific weapons (like fans for Dancers and tomes for Scholars). In battle, you control a party of eight in two rows, and are free to switch between front and back party members before acting.

The Boost and Break systems are in play, as well as active and passive skills, including Path Actions, which improve as your reputation increases – measured by Wealth, Fame and Power.

The only downside is that there are no healing items, but characters do learn skills that let them passively refill HP, SP and BP in battle, and staying the night at an inn always costs a flat 20 leaves.

Touch and swipe controls are used to navigate, and you can fast travel between locations on the world map, as well as by tapping icons on an area map. Despite all these hands-off mechanics, I would have liked to see an auto-battle function as well – backtracking through areas with weak monsters can be tedious.

The major downside to "guiding" characters is that each character only specializes in one magical element, making it difficult to cover all the elemental and weapon bases. You'll have less difficulty on that front only if you have the Rubies to burn, but if not, be prepared to do a lot of tedious level grinding.

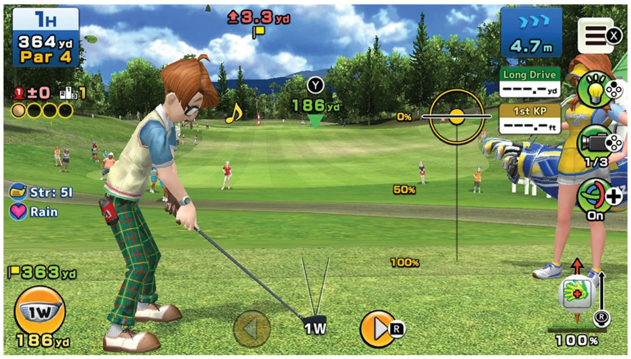
On a game design level, a lot of the music consists of re-used tracks, but the new tracks composed by Yasunori Nishiki really pack an emotional punch.

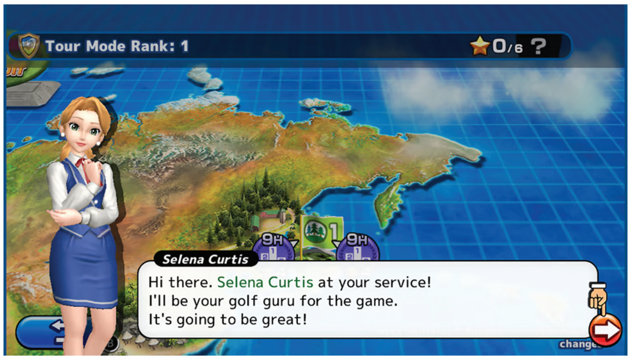
Unfortunately, the same can't be said of the voice work – there is no English voice acting, despite the fact there was in the original, and there's a lot of incidental dialogue in battle that could've really brought out the life of the characters, if it had been dubbed.

If you're a diehard Octopath fan and want to dive further into the lore, then this game is for you; otherwise, it's going to go completely over your head, and you'd be better off sticking with the core series on the Switch. **– REBECCA**

7.0

MOBILE PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RATING: 12+





Hot Shots Hits the Switch

EASY COME EASY GOLF

WHILE THE RECENT Mario Golf: Super Rush did fairly well, I personally stuck with the N64 original that summer! And the primary reason is that I missed the classic "three-click swing" meter. Up until now, the Switch has had a hole in its lineup, with no classic, arcadey take on hitting the links – but Easy Come Easy Golf is here to fill that gap. No stranger to this subgenre, developer Clap Hanz is made up of Camelot and Hot Shots Golf alumni.

The tried-and-true three-click swing mechanic actually got its start way back in the NES game Golf, with NES Open Tournament Golf refining the system several years later. And anyone who likes that approach will feel right at home here! While the power meter is more forgiving, the accuracy meter now shows up for putts, so it shakes out to be a similar level of challenge as before. My only issue is that the controls feel ever-so-slightly laggy when timing your shots. I adjusted, but it's disappointing that it's not 100% precise.

While the controls are familiar, the game does have a new gimmick of its own: You'll be using a rotating cast of characters throughout each of the game's many courses. Before you take on any of the nine-hole challenges, you can see each hole's par and assign one of your golfers to each one. Want to try for a hole-in-one on a three-par? Choose someone who specializes in precision! Need someone who can feasibly sink an albatross on a five-par? Bring out the heavy hitters! Likewise, each character has a specific favorite club that, when used, tends to land in the hole a little easier. These ideas are fun gameplay wrinkles, although the character stats aren't quite as differentiated as you'd expect, given that this is the main hook.

Even so, I appreciated the chance to try everyone, because the cast is well-animated, varied and packed with personality. From a coy teen who seems to be channeling Violet from The Incredibles to a lively granny who throws her back out while celebrating birdies, everyone is well-realized and lots of fun to watch. Sadly, they aren't much fun to listen to – since there are no voice clips outside of your selectable pair of caddies. But it's still exciting to unlock each of the 30 characters.

To get these guys to join you is no small task either! Easy Golf boasts an impressive 11 nine-hole courses, each stationed in a different part of the world, and you need to play them again and again to unlock new characters and courses. The progression is somewhat slower than I'd like, but not to an unreasonable degree.

While the lack of 18-hole courses is a minor disappointment, the variety and quantity of what's here make up for it in my eyes. After all, one of my favorite things about golf games is that tangible outdoor atmosphere, and Easy Golf boasts that in spades. The visuals are somewhat modest, but they have a bright and sharp quality that reminds me of the palette from Dreamcast games.

So if you're like me and can't get enough classic-style golf, give Easy Come Easy Golf a try. It's not quite a hole-in-one, but still a sub-par game. (That's good, right?) **– MATTHEW T.**

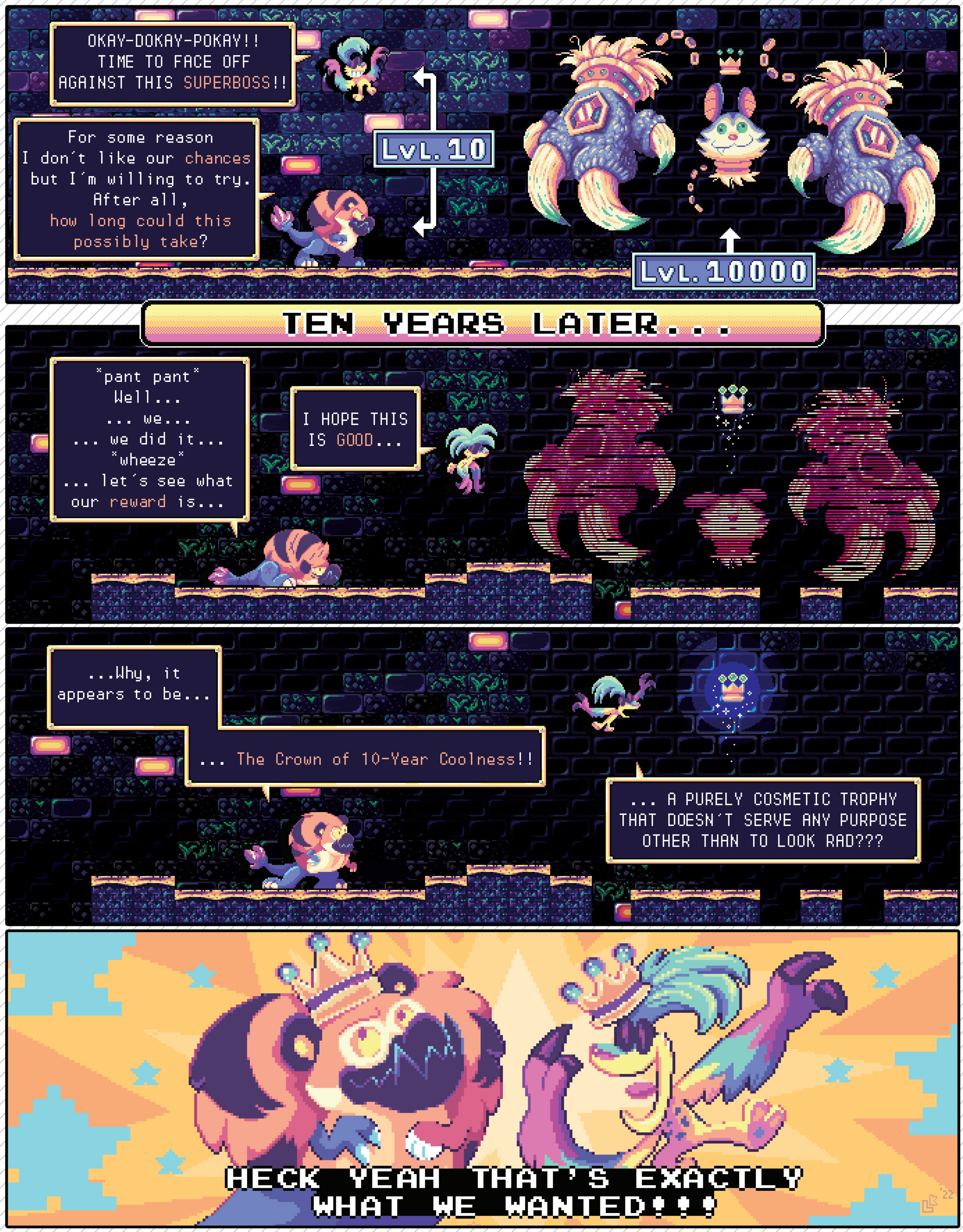
8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: CLAP HANZ RATING: E

REST 0

the sitcom starring a final boss and an obnoxious '90s video game mascot

by LLK



BY LINDSEY LAYNE KING

Ten Years of NINTENDO FORCE

2013

WHAT WAS IT that made Nintendo Power feel so magical?

I spent around five months asking myself that question at the end of 2012. NP had announced in August that they'd be ending their run that December, and the idea to assemble a successor sparked in my mind almost immediately. So I had around five months to figure out how to actually do that – design-wise and vibe-wise.

If you flip back through our first few issues, then compare them against NP's final few issues, you'll see a lot of shared DNA there. We carried forward their takes on things like the Download section having an "Evaluation Station" with unscored game reviews, the general selection of sections and their placement (like having the Community section at the end of each issue) and much, much more. Some of those things we quickly moved away from – Download reviews got bigger and earned full scores soon, leaving NP's "Grumble Grumbles" in the past – but other elements endure to this day. Our Character Profiles in the Retro section originated as NP's two-page Star Power spreads!

At the same time as we were trying to find the right balance between continuing the look and feel of Nintendo Power and blazing our own trail, we had to keep covering what was happening on Nintendo's side of the game industry! The Wii U had just launched as NP ended, so it fell to us to cover its first full year on the market. But the 3DS was heading into its third, firing on all cylinders!

That's probably why 3DS games dominated our first year of issues – five of the six of them put 3DS titles on the cover! (The poor Wii U didn't get a cover game until the last issue of the year, with Super Mario 3D World.)

Fire Emblem Awakening earned the honor of being NF's first cover star, and its bold artwork featuring all of its heroes fighting together as one perfectly echoed how our team of writers and artists had come together to work toward the common goal of preserving NP's legacy in print.

Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon was just called Luigi's Mansion 2 in other territories, and that would have been a better fit for the theme of that second issue: "A Celebration of Sequels," which looked at all the different ways that studios could choose to follow up a hit game.

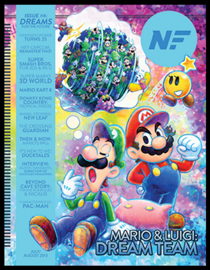
"Nintendo at the Movies" was the focus for NF #3, chosen largely because David wanted to do a 20th anniversary feature celebrating the 1993 Super Mario Bros. movie. (Maybe we should've saved that name for another 10 years?)

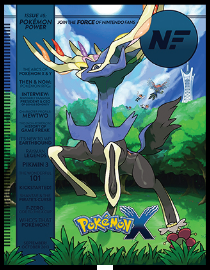
Mario & Luigi: Dream Team inspired "Dreams for the Future" for NF #4, and we had a big wishlist feature inside – my wish for Ice Climber 2 still hasn't been granted.

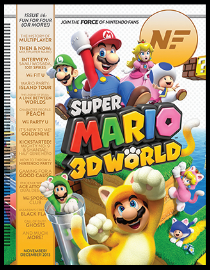
"Pokémon Power" was our first double-covered issue, but more important than that, it featured our first anti-Dunsparce joke! (Yes, Dunsparce is still the worst 10 years later.)

And the aforementioned Super Mario 3D World cover wrapped around "Fun for Four (or More!)" which celebrated multiplayer gaming.

Issues having names/themes was something that emerged organically as NF developed its own identity, and I'm incredibly proud of what we were able to accomplish in our first year! If you were with us from the beginning, thank you so much for sticking with us for a decade! **— LUCAS**







2014

THIS WAS A rough year for the game industry. Game bloggers and journalists were under attack for being unethical, anti-social justice advocates became major players in the gaming discourse and people who just wanted to play games for fun often felt lost in the shuffle.

With a spirit of relentless positivity, NF attempted to offer an antidote to all that toxic drama. Issue #7 was themed around "New Beginnings," symbolized by Shovel Knight, the mascot for the former WayForward developers at Yacht Club Games. Chris Seavor, the creator of Conker, was our featured Interview guest, and his career retrospective was matched by a massive feature on multiple developers who had started their own companies. Some of them included Hironobu Sakaguchi, PlatinumGames and Yuji Naka (in a better season of life) who offered us an exclusive quote on his experience forming Prope.

Issue #8 was focused on Mario Kart 8, a game that was predicted by Polygon to be the worst-selling Mario Kart ever, but later became one of Nintendo's biggest hits of all time on Switch. Kris Randazzo made his debut here with a new Retro column called Peripheral Vision, we interviewed ex-Rare devs Jennifer Schneidereit and Phil Tossell and "The Year of Waluigi" April Fool's feature by Matthew Taranto worked to foreshadow our infamous Waluigi-themed NF #35.

Things took a turn for the empathetically melancholy with #9. The "Where Have All The Fathers Gone?" issue featured a flippable cover with the unflappable leads of Professor Layton vs. Phoenix Wright. The big feature here was on absent Dads in gaming, like the parents of Samus and Link, and of course Ness' Dad in EarthBound, who is represented by nothing but a telephone. We also got an exclusive Shovel Knight comic written by Sean Velasco, and a look at bad-but-loving Dads like Bowser and . . . Dr. Wily?!?

Crossovers were key for #10, our "When Worlds Collide" issue. Hyrule Warriors, the (at the time) Wii U-exclusive mingling of Dynasty Warriors and the entire Zelda timeline, made the cover, and that was just the tip of the cross-collaborative iceberg. There was also exclusive artwork from Aban Hawkins and the 1001 Spikes showing off the game's official cameos from Cave Story and BIT.TRIP, and other costumes inspired by Mario, Ghosts 'N Goblins, Castlevania and Street Fighter. NF #10 also marked the comic debut of Natalie Francesca Keene, the non-canon daughter of Captain N: The Game Master, who would appear in this issue and the next.

Ladies took the lead in Issue #11, with Shantae on the cover and expert animator Mariel Cartwright in the Interview chair. (She was the animation director of Skullgirls, one of the most beautifully drawn games of all time!) We also highlighted our favorite women in games and looked at the history of the Game Boy, which turned 25 that year.

The year came to a kindhearted end with #12's "The Gratitude Project." There was a detailed report on the launch of amiibo, some full-throated praise for Smash Bros. for 3DS and Wii U, and maybe most importantly, we challenged readers to tweet as positively as possible in our #GratitudeProject contest. Though amiibos were the prize, amplifying positivity in the game community was the real goal here, in a time when that was desperately needed! **— JONATHAN**

2015

THE YEAR I formally joined the Nintendo Force, 2015, was a year of new beginnings as well as sad goodbyes for Nintendo. The Wii U was beginning to pick up steam after a slow start, and the 3DS was given a "New" upgrade.

Our first issue of 2015, lucky #13, showcased Kirby and the Rainbow Curse, with a beautiful piece of clay artwork by Camille Young gracing the cover. We also were treated to an early look at what would become The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, as well as The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask 3D, Mario Party 10, Splatoon, the Fire Emblem Fates duology and the port of Xenoblade Chronicles to the New Nintendo 3DS. The main feature, "Art & Soul," looked at games that had unique and defining art styles, from Donkey Kong Country's pre-rendered 3D graphics to Skyward Sword's impressionist-inspired world.

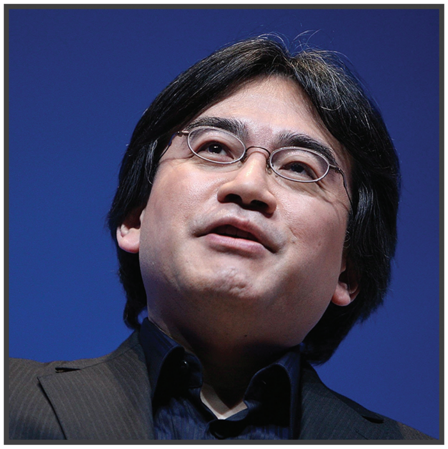
Issue #14's cover was shared between Mario Party 10 and Code Name: S.T.E.A.M., and the issue's theme centered on "Old vs. New," with a look at several games that deserved a new lease on life with a conversion to HD. We'd eventually get New Pokémon Snap on the Nintendo Switch in 2021, but Lucas' prediction of an HD re-release of The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess would come true only a year later! The other major highlight: an interview with Mega Man composer Manami Matsumae. A small news article also included a clue to the future: the announcement of a new console, codenamed NX . . .

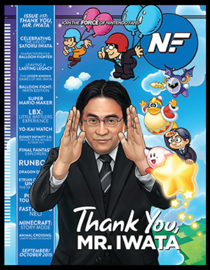
Splatoon made its big splash in NF #15, along with the announcement that Nintendo was partnering with Universal Studios to build a theme park! (Super Nintendo World opened in Osaka in 2021, and will open in California this February!) The staff nominated additions to the Super Smash Bros. roster, with three of their predictions — Inklings (Tony), Simon Belmont (David) and Ridley (Matthew T.) — eventually making the roster in Super Smash Bros. Ultimate. (My choice would have been Mike Jones from StarTropics.) Also, Matthew's own game, Tadpole Treble, was given the star treatment in a special feature.

Super Mario Maker took center stage in Issue #16, covering the reveals from E3 2015, as well as the first Nintendo World Championships to be contested in 25 years. There were looks at Star Fox Zero, Yoshi's Woolly World, Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night and the much-maligned Metroid Prime: Federation Force, and a review of EarthBound Beginnings, the previously unreleased localization of the original Mother on NES.

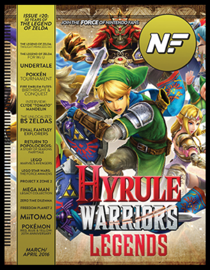
Satoru Iwata's untimely passing became the overall theme for Issue #17, with the cover showcasing portraits of Iwata done in the style of games he had a hand in creating, from Balloon Fight to Super Smash Bros. Inside, we presented a timeline of his time at Nintendo and his impact on the company and video game development in general, along with reviews of Animal Crossing: Happy Home Designer and Super Mario Maker.

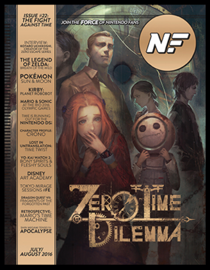
Finally, 2015's outer space-themed Issue #18 arrived with Xenoblade Chronicles X gracing the cover, along with a look at the then-unreleased Star Fox 2, which would eventually see the light of day in 2017 on the SNES Classic Edition. The reviews were decidedly "toys to life"-themed, with looks at Skylanders Superchargers, Disney Infinity 3.0, LEGO Dimensions and Animal Crossing: amiibo Festival. **— REBECCA**

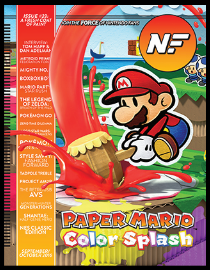


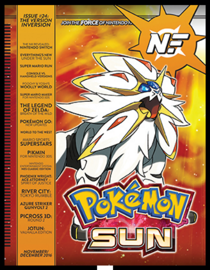


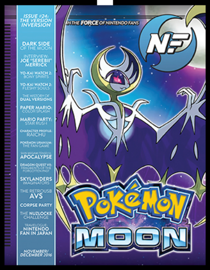
There were no double covers this year!











2016

2016 WAS A transitional year with far-reaching consequences. On the more concerning end, the U.K. voted to leave the European Union, while the U.S. elected a most controversial President. Tempering those worries were several small-scale yet hopeful developments – like when yours truly accepted a teaching position in Japan, as detailed in Issue #24! And as we'll soon see, Nintendo too had reason to hope after a particularly sluggish hardware cycle.

Our lead issue discussed delays and their impact on expectations and quality. The latest Zelda is always guaranteed to be pushed back for extra polish, but why would Nintendo sit on EarthBound Beginnings for 26 years when localization was complete? Instead of waiting for others to deliver the goods, why not craft your own adventure in Super Mario Maker? The D.I.Y. platformer had just received an update that added, among other features, a handy bookmarking website for users to more easily search for levels (which Nintendo bizarrely never bothered to implement for the Switch sequel).

Hyrule Warriors Legends charged into the spotlight in #20. Coverage of the 3DS expansion of the Wii U hack-and-slash neatly segued into a 17-page retrospective on Zelda's history, covering games, cartoons and even a failed movie pitch. But while Hyrule hijinks commanded most of our attention, we did spare a moment for Miitomo, Nintendo's first foray into smartphone gaming. It may not have offered tons of depth, but at least it gave Miis renewed life as social media stars.

Sculptor Ruy Fernando Estrada Rivera made NF #21 extra special with a custom Mother 3 cover modeled out of clay. We then highlighted other titles that similarly never left Japan, including Link's Awakening precursor For the Frog the Bell Tolls and DS fighter Jump Super Stars, and reviewed the much-maligned Star Fox Zero.

Speaking of titles with "Zero" in them, Zero Time Dilemma took point in #22. The conclusion to Kotaro Uchikoshi's Zero Escape trilogy almost didn't materialize, but thanks to grassroots support from Operation Bluebird on Facebook, the series was able to defy fate. Not as lucky was DSiWare, announced to shut down the following year. The Big N was too busy championing more promising ventures – namely Breath of the Wild. Its full E3 reveal shocked media outlets not only with its scope, but also for the guts Nintendo displayed in showcasing nothing else at their booth!

Neal put Pokémon GO through its paces in #23. He awarded it a respectable 7.5, which in hindsight greatly undervalued the massive globe-conquering phenomenon Niantic's AR monster-catching app would become! In contrast, David's 6.0 score for Mighty No. 9 probably overvalued Keiji Inafune's wannabe Mega Man spiritual successor. At least we can agree that Tadpole Treble, the first game from our very own Matthew Taranto, was rightly deserving of all the praise lavished upon it! (No apologies for nepotism!)

Rounding out 2016 was another double-sided Pokémon special, this time covering Sun and Moon. Those festivities were overshadowed by a pair of hot hardware developments, though: The NES Classic Edition arrived in November, kick-starting a miniature console craze, and we got the proper reveal of Nintendo NX, hereby known as Switch! The rumors of a home/portable hybrid turned out to be true! **– TONY**

2017

THE Wii U WAS in the rearview as the calendar flipped into 2017, as Nintendo was eager to put the past behind them and dash straight ahead into the all-new era of the Nintendo Switch. Just one major release remained for the outgoing machine: a game many of you have already declared as the best game of the last decade!

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild was the perfect poster child for the transition between two different hardware generations, as like Twilight Princess had done years before, it launched with two versions: one a swan song for the old system, and the other a Day 1 launch title for the new. Nintendo, fully aware that they were about to publish a masterpiece, continued their heavy marketing of the game and used the huge momentum from its final big pre-release trailer in January to elevate the entire upcoming launch lineup for the system.

Our coverage of the Switch launch was two-fold, spread across the first two issues of 2017. For NF #25, Link's all-new look took the spotlight and we embraced Breath of the Wild's dual release to talk about the generational transition in "Farewell Wii U, Hello Switch!" Our central feature looked back on 20 of the biggest hits on the Wii U, and we debated whether or not they'd get ported to the Switch – or if they'd get direct sequels instead. So far 16 of them have indeed made a Switch appearance via port or follow-up! The holdouts include Nintendo Land (which was heavily reliant on the Wii U GamePad), Kirby and the Rainbow Curse (also GamePad-dependent), Star Fox Zero and The Wind Waker HD. (Twilight Princess HD was lumped in with that one too.) I still wouldn't say no to encores from any of them, or Xenoblade Chronicles X either!

NF #26 was "The Nintendo Switch Launch Guide" and was exactly as straightforward as that sounds. We previewed just about every Switch game known to exist at the time as we prepared for the system to go on sale on March 3, 2017!

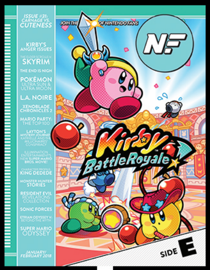
After the Switch era had officially begun, our first issue was "When Two is Better Than One," with Splatoon 2 on the cover and two separate central features. One looked back at sequels that did a great job refining the ideas of their series' first game (like Street Fighter II being a whole lot better than the first Street Fighter), and the second spotlighted incredible two-player co-op experiences (like Contra on NES).

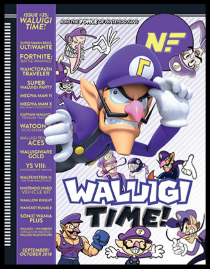
Probably the weirdest, most shocking reveal of this era was the crossover between the Mario and Rabbids brands – and the result being a turn-based strategy game! So NF #28 was "The Element of Surprise!" and discussed the biggest, best, most jaw-dropping announcements in the history of Nintendo. One we mentioned was the logo-only reveal of Metroid Prime 4 . . . which, uh, we're still waiting for. Yeah.

Maybe it was that Metroid hype that got us to put Samus Returns on the cover of the next issue! We presented a whole history of her exploits in "Revenge of the Hunter" and acknowledged that the 3DS was still alive and kicking even with the Switch fully in the driver's seat.

Finally, 2017 came to a close with "The Man of Many Hats," our 30th issue. Super Mario Odyssey and its many new Mario transformations had us wanting to take stock of the best older Mario forms and power-ups! We also reviewed Star Fox 2, which was finally officially released! **— LUCAS**

The official shift into the Switch era!





2018

AFTER LAUNCHING A brand-new hardware platform and massive new installments in the Zelda, Mario, Metroid, Splatoon and Xenoblade series all within the same calendar year, Nintendo kind of ran out of steam for a while as we turned the corner into 2018. I mean, when the biggest first-party release for the whole first half of the year is literally a stack of cardboard boxes, you have to admit that the rollercoaster has slowed down considerably.

Even still, it was a fascinating time to continuing covering Nintendo's efforts, because for the first time since NF came into existence, the company was truly popular once again! The Switch had been a sensational sales success from the start, and the whole industry was back to actually paying attention to the Big N (after ignoring them for nearly the entirety of the Wii U generation).

The sixth year of Nintendo Force issues began with what I still feel was an inventive new spin on a double-cover issue: "Carnage vs. Cuteness." The Nintendo Switch embracing M-rated games was a topic of some debate at the time, following years of the company mostly steering clear of anything too adult-oriented in order to maintain their "kid-friendly" image. So one side of the issue was "E-rated" and represented by cutesy Kirby, while the other side highlighted M-rated works like Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus. And they clashed in the middle!

Companies were scrambling to capitalize on the success of the Switch by the time it hit the first anniversary of its release, so we prepared "The Port Report" in NF #32 to take stock of all the many older titles getting new Switch editions. Street Fighter claimed the cover!

That stack of cardboard I mentioned was up next, as the goofy Nintendo Labo product line proved the company's designers could still think outside the box. NF #33 ended up being one of our most popular ever, thanks to it including an exclusive Limited Run Games trading card!

My personal favorite moment of 2018: the long-awaited return of Mega Man! We dedicated NF #34 to Mega Man 11 and celebrated the whole history of the original Blue Bomber. (Fingers crossed that Mega Man 12 will show up someday!)

And then, my friends, we gave you Waluigi. Nintendo had fully revealed Super Smash Bros. Ultimate at E3 2018, and they had further fully revealed that Waluigi was once again not going to be a fully playable fighter! The fan outcry was as immense as it gets, as Waluigi lovers banded together to protest the infuriating unfairness of it all! (Though hopefully most of that was a fun-loving kind of mock outrage.) We struck while the iron was hot and gave full control of NF #35 to the man himself, for some extended "Waluigi Time!" It was honestly one of the most fun issues to put together that we've ever done, and I'm still in awe of the incredible poster our artists were able to assemble by collaborating to render the great purple man in all kinds of different styles.

Finally, with Waluigi appropriately honored, we moved on to finish the year with the Smash-spotlighting "Everyone is Here!" Its core feature gave individual attention to each playable fighter in the series' Ultimate sequel. (Though the roster only expanded further after that, through DLC!) NF #36 was also the longest issue we've ever done, with 100 total pages! **— LUCAS**

2019

THE SWITCH WAS an absolute powerhouse in 2019, releasing hit after hit that we covered in great detail.

We kicked things off with Shovel Knight: Treasure Trove hitting the cover of Issue #37, along with an extensive look at Shovel Knight's serendipitous journey to that point. We even covered all of his cameos! A group interview of several members of Yacht Club to get their take on their success was an insightful read, and readers heard our case for Super Smash Bros. Ultimate being a perfect 10. The Character Profile was the villainous Piranha Plant, who was the biggest Smash roster surprise to that point!

Issue #38 showed our crafty side, with Yoshi's Crafted World and Kirby's Extra Epic Yarn sharing a cover. The NF Game Awards revealed Super Smash Bros. Ultimate as Game of the Year for 2018, and the Profile was of the dastardly wizard Kamek. Rivals Unraveled was our feature, which spotlighted sparring stars like Mario and Sonic, Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest, Tetris and Puyo Puyo and . . . Kirby and Yoshi?! They are so alike and yet so different! We interviewed the author of Console Wars, Blake J. Harris, and Jonathan Holmes introduced us to The Suite Life of Drac & Grody comic – a hilarious look at the Castlevania universe.

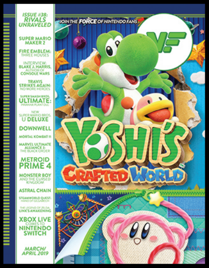
Super Mario Maker 2 dominated Issue #39, bringing a feature called Brick by Brick that outlined the new additions known at the time. Boom Boom and Pom Pom made the Profile, Cassie Chui gave us a peek into her game design and we reviewed the games from the last issue's cover. We built Labo VR while also looking at its inspiration and complete flop, the Virtual Boy, and said goodbye to Reggie Fils-Aimé, who retired as president of Nintendo of America.

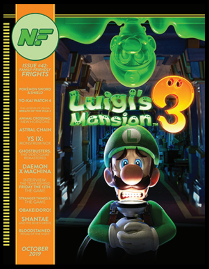
Fire Emblem: Three Houses graced the cover of NF #40, prompting us to give a full history of the series as our feature (that I still reference). We profiled the lesser-known Vince from Art Academy, wrapped up our Labo VR review and reviewed the Detective Pikachu movie. One of my favorite interviews is chronicled here: the Moldenhauer family of Cuphead fame.

The long-awaited arrival of Dragon Quest XI was anticipated with an extensive history lesson in the Quest for Success feature in Issue #41. Our Debate section had us pondering the ways DQ could be more successful in the West. The DQ Slime was our Character Profile, and we interviewed YouTube content creator Abdallah. The Switch Lite was introduced in this issue as well.

Our spookiest issue sported Luigi's Mansion 3 on the cover and a whole feature dedicated to Nintendo Frights, which covered everything from family-friendly freaks to seriously spine-tingling scares. Issue #42 also had fun looking at character costumes and took a look at Nintendo's resident mad scientist E. Gadd in the Profile. We interviewed Gun Media's Rob Fox and Daniel Nixon and hosted a Boo Hunt where readers had to spot hidden Boos.

The final issue of the year had us split between Pokémon Sword & Shield, having half of #43 dedicated to each. Our feature covered the controversy of that game not allowing players to catch all the 'mons, and our debate had us pick sides between defending the decision and lambasting it. Nostalgia also hit hard with our look back at The Wizard for its 30th anniversary! **— BRETT**





Overflow! Eight covers in one year!

2020

Hyrule Warriors has had three NF covers!

2020 WAS A monumental year for a number of reasons, but it was ultimately defined by the beginning of a global pandemic. While Nintendo didn't escape its effects – resulting in numerous product delays – they still managed to release a number of absolutely wonderful games, and we were right there to cover them.

The theme of our first issue of the year was "Tokyo Takeover" and Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE Encore was featured on the cover. Combining the worlds of Shin Megami Tensei and Fire Emblem seemed like a surefire recipe for success, but like a lot of things that happened on the Wii U, its original release underperformed. Nintendo decided to give it a second chance on Switch though, and so did we. We also got a closer look at Super Nintendo World's progress, reviewed Pokémon Sword & Shield, exercised with Ring Fit Adventure, welcomed Terry Bogard to Smash and awarded Dragon Quest XI S our 2019 Game of the Year. Gaming in 2020 was off to a solid start!

However, nothing could have prepared us for the absolutely massive success of our next cover story: Animal Crossing was a big hit on the 3DS, but it became a bonafide global phenomenon when New Horizons landed on Switch! The latest entry in Nintendo's life simulation series became the perfect thing to keep millions of people company while they were stuck at home. To celebrate its launch, we dove into the history of the franchise, detailing every one of its releases dating all the way back to the 64DD.

Speaking of animals, we also did a full rundown of some of the best animal friends to grace Nintendo platforms, dove into the evolution of Nintendo's leading animals like Donkey Kong and Fox McCloud and reviewed the first live-action Sonic the Hedgehog movie.

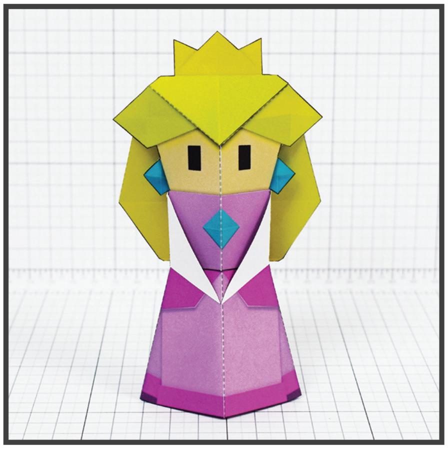
"Live by the Sword" was NF #46, as we used Nintendo's third release of Xenoblade Chronicles as an excuse to talk about the greatest blades in video games. Hopefully you all now fully understand the power of the Monado!

The next issue turned its attention to Paper Mario: The Origami King, complete with an actual foldable origami Princess Peach! We looked back at the history of Mario's RPG outings and how they have evolved over the years, followed by a roundtable discussion about why we think fans are so "passionate" about the direction of the Paper Mario series.

Issue #48 put even more of a focus on Mario as we celebrated the 35th anniversary of Super Mario Bros.! We went year by year, starting with his first appearance in 1981, breaking down Mario's various gaming exploits. (Just like we're doing now for Nintendo Force!) We even dedicated an entire page to Hotel Mario for CD-i!

We capped off the year with the delicious combination of peanut butter and chocolate. Our central feature focused on games that combine two distinct styles to create something even better, which landed Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity on the cover. We were sad to report the official discontinuation of the 3DS line, but overjoyed when Minecraft officially joined Smash Bros. Mario's birthday bash continued with very positive reviews for the tragically short-lived Super Mario Bros. 35 and real-life RC racing experience Mario Kart Live: Home Circuit.

Overall, 2020 was a difficult year, but video games persevered in a marvelous way. **– KRIS**



2021

STILL FEELING THE effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2021 was a tough year in many ways, but it also signaled some glimmers of hope and the start of a comeback, both in the video game industry and the world as a whole.

It's only fitting that several games of 2021 felt like comebacks, whether in the form of a completely new game for their respective franchises, or past titles getting a second chance at life by releasing on Switch with some extra oomph!

Our first issue of the year, #50, focused on Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury. This enhanced port of the original 2013 game added a new campaign featuring a huge, extra-angry Bowser and a new open world to explore. With a colossal King Koopa in the mix, it turned out bigger was better, as Bowser's Fury earned a 10 from us! We also delved into Nintendo's love of re-releasing games with extra content as the years go by.

This point was proven again with another 2021 release, The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword HD, which claimed the cover spot on Issue #53. In this issue, the staff examined the highs and lows of Skyward Sword's initial Wii release in 2011, and also discussed the insightful "Ask Iwata" book that featured words of wisdom from former Nintendo CEO Satoru Iwata.

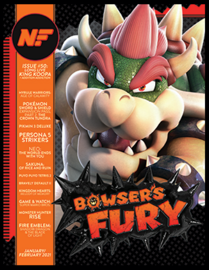
2021 also saw several familiar franchises step into the spotlight again, to varying degrees of success. After waiting 22 years, Pokémon Snap finally got a sequel! It marked the cover of Issue #52, where we not only zoomed in on this game, but also other ways photography and gaming intersect.

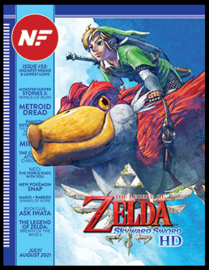
#55 featured perhaps the biggest return of the year in Metroid Dread, releasing after being in off-and-on development for 16 years and offering an all-new 2D adventure with Samus Aran. Since we had already done a history of the Metroid series in Issue #29, Dread's feature focused on the path Samus forged through previous games and what her future might look like.

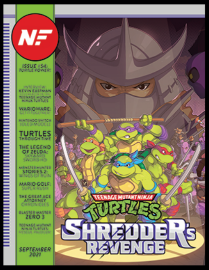
While New Pokémon Snap and Metroid Dread made their mark, other comebacks didn't quite stick the landing in 2021. Issue #54 chronicled all things Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, from a look back at the franchise's games through the feature Turtles Through Time to an interview with TMNT co-creator Kevin Eastman! It was all in preparation for the release of Shredder's Revenge, which was set for 2021 but delayed to 2022. The extra time paid off though, as the game was released to great acclaim (with more to come – see Page 42).

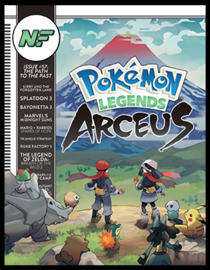
Our cover game for NF #56, Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp, received a delay from its planned release date in December 2021 and was delayed again in 2022. A remake of Advance Wars and its sequel, Re-Boot Camp is set to provide a return for the Wars series after more than a decade (if it ever comes out). #56 provided a double feature to prepare for this release, including a comprehensive look at the Wars series and a deep dive into the work of the developers at WayForward.

The remaining issue of the year was #51, featuring Jonathan's detailed and fascinating coverage of game developer Suda51 and No More Heroes III, including a 51-question interview, a comprehensive look at his career and a profile of No More Heroes protagonist Travis Touchdown. That issue was a touchdown for sure! **— MAGGIE**









2022

AND SO WE arrive at NF Year #10 out of 10 so far. It's probably impossible to have a properly reflective perspective on Nintendo's decisions in 2022 and our magazine coverage that was created in response, given that we're actually still in 2022 as I'm writing this. But by golly I'll give it my best effort and try to gaze into the future to predict the long-term impacts of this year and these games!

2022 was bookended by Pokémon releases, as Pokémon Legends: Arceus kicked off Nintendo's release calendar in January and Scarlet & Violet closed it out in November. This likely wasn't the original plan – the weight of the global COVID-19 pandemic continued to be a burden into 2022, and I'm sure development delays related to that caused Legends to slip into this calendar year. It – and the remakes of Diamond & Pearl that launched just two months earlier in November 2021 – were surely originally meant to be released much sooner than they were.

Still, we covered them when they came, and that meant NF #57 springboarded off the time travel hook of Legends: Arceus for a central feature/final preview called "A Path to the Past" and #62 focused on the open-world design of Scarlet & Violet's go-anywhere Paldea region with "Wide Open Spaces." Our Scarlet & Violet review lies further ahead in this issue, but I think 2022 has clearly demonstrated that free-roaming exploration is the direction for Pokémon going forward.

Another series that blazed a new trail in 2022 was Kirby, as Kirby and the Forgotten Land was an instant masterpiece of 3D game design – for a franchise that had barely dabbled in 3D before! HAL Laboratory played the long game, letting all the other big brands of the '90s figure out what worked and what didn't in 3D gaming for a few decades, then sweeping in with a refined design seemingly out of nowhere. Brilliant stuff!

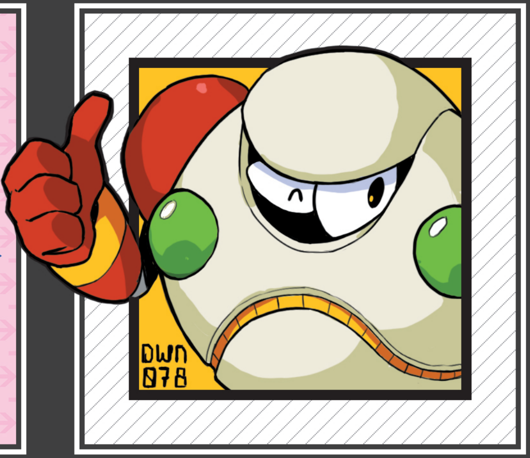
Our Kirby-covered Issue #58 was "Apocalypse Wow!" in response to cute little Kirby always finding himself in end-of-the-world scenarios, facing down crazy, twisted beast deities before the credits roll. His foes are always so weird!

Playing off NF #32's title "The Port Report," we next brought you "The Sport Report" for NF #59. The Mario Strikers series finally came back! I'd been wanting an excuse to do a sports-themed issue for a long time, and Battle League gave us one. We did a whole history of video game sports adaptations that I think was my favorite feature of the whole year!

The River City Girls couldn't wait to get on the NF cover, so they did so in July – even though their new game didn't drop until December! But it's never the wrong time to celebrate the beat-'em-up genre, so that's just what we did in #60.

Last to be discussed here but first in my heart for its insane three-way split cover design: Issue #61, "The Rule of Three." Again, I may not be Nostradamus, but I can predict with certainty that there will never again be a string of threequels one after another after another like we got with Xenoblade Chronicles 3, Splatoon 3 and Bayonetta 3. It was just too perfect! We just had to mark the moment with our craziest cover composition ever, and content brought to you by the number 3.

This article, though, has been brought to you by the number 10! Thank you all so much for supporting us for 10 whole years! **— LUCAS**



THE NINTENDO FORCE GAME OF THE YEAR AWARDS 2022

As video game fans, we can't truly usher in a new year until we observe the ancient annual tradition of rendering final judgment on all the releases of the past 12 months. 2022 gave us remarkably strong showings in every category imaginable, so the debate to settle on just one winner for each honor was a complicated one! The following pages collect our thoughts and final decisions – so let's see if you'll decide to agree with our selections or not!

BEST GRAPHICS
KIRBY AND THE FORGOTTEN LAND

After adventuring almost exclusively in two dimensions for most of the last three decades, Kirby finally, fully went 3D as he explored the all-new Forgotten Land. And what a spectacular land it is! It's like HAL's 3D talents were all bottled up for years, then burst forth in an explosion of eye-catching environments. Stunning!

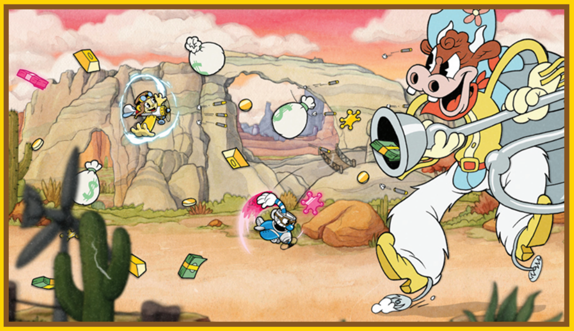
BEST MUSIC
XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 3

The Xenoblade series is brilliant visually, has engrossing stories in every installment and boasts gameplay systems that are more intricately designed than maybe any other ongoing JRPG saga's . . . and yet it's the franchise's glorious soundtracks that may be their very best aspect! This latest effort is purely marvelous.

BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

BEST CHALLENGE
CUPHEAD: THE DELICIOUS LAST COURSE

With its original release years ago, Cuphead was defined almost as much by its difficulty as by its eye-catching rubber hose cartoon art style. With its new Delicious Last Course content, the game once again reclaims the crown for most rewarding challenge.



BEST THEME & FUN
KIRBY'S DREAM BUFFET

Who wouldn't want to go wild and chow down on colossal confections the size of a house? Kirby's getting ready to eat the cake seen below as Dream Buffet begins, but then he's suddenly shrunken down to about the size of one of its strawberries. Then it's a race to eat, eat, EAT! What a fun and funny idea!

BEST MULTIPLAYER
TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: SHREDDER'S REVENGE

A brand-new four-player co-op experience starring the classic cartoon Turtles from the '80s was already more than we could've asked for, but then the team at Tribute went extra wild and threw in two more players! Six-player TMNT with friends is an absolute blast.

BEST PLAY CONTROL
BAYONETTA 3

The developers at PlatinumGames have demonstrated their mastery of the character action genre once again, as Bayonetta spins, weaves, kicks and shoots her way through every scene entirely at the whim of the player. She's a whirling dervish of destruction, and it feels so good to be able to control the cause of such carnage!

BIGGEST SURPRISE
RETURN TO MONKEY ISLAND

Talk about your unexpected announcements! A new sequel in the Monkey Island series was not something anyone predicted for 2022, but beyond the shock of the game itself was the further stunner that the series' original creator, Ron Gilbert, was once again back at the helm of the ship! Oh captain, my captain!

BEST REMASTER
LIVE A LIVE

Lamented as a "Lost in Untranslation" hidden gem for nearly 30 years, this SNES-era epic was reborn on the Switch in the spectacular new HD-2D style that the developers at Square Enix are well on their way toward mastering. But it doesn't just look good – this is a time-hopping tale that is definitely worth your time to play!

BEST NEW CHARACTERS
SHIVER, FRYE & BIG MAN

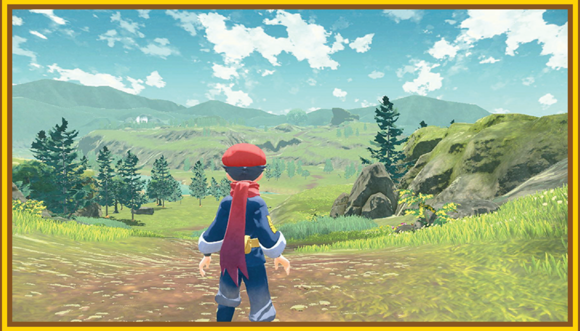
The Splatoon series has been home to an incredible supporting cast from the very beginning, when instant icons like Judd, Cap'n Cuttlefish, DJ. Octavio and the Squid Sisters first introduced us to the far-flung future world in which Turf Wars reign supreme. Just as Callie and Marie headlined that first game and Pearl and Marina presented the action in the second, Splatoon 3 has its own set of hosts: Shiver, Frye and Big Man! Known together as Deep Cut when they perform as a band, this talktative trio kicks off every session of the game with a broadcast of their Anarchy Splatcast. (Thankfully, unlike past games' unskippable announcements of current stages, Deep Cut's can be bypassed.) Their biggest role comes around only once every couple of months or so, though: They each lead one team in the Splatfests, which now divide the players into three rival factions. Sometimes fans pick a team just because they like one of these leaders the best!

BEST REVIVAL
TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: SHREDDER'S REVENGE

The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles are venerable video game veterans, having played a role in the rise of the popularity of Nintendo as a whole all the way back in the 8-bit NES era – but throughout most of the last decade, their appearances on Nintendo hardware have mostly been relegated to cameos in Smash clones and kart racers. So it was extra incredible to hear that the heroes in a half shell would finally be making a comeback with an all-new, original action game. And not only that, but a game designed as an arcade-styled belt-scrolling beat-'em-up! And not only *that*, but a game starring the original cartoon versions of the Turtles from the 1987 Saturday morning show!! Shredder's Revenge brought a whole nostalgic era of TMNT history back to life, and perfectly recaptured the look, feel and sound of those most formative years for this famous franchise. (And then the impressive Cowabunga Collection kept the momentum rolling with a great bundle of all of that era's old TMNT titles!)

BEST INNOVATION
POKÉMON LEGENDS: ARCEUS

"Open-world Pokémon" has existed in various degrees in various games over the past few years (and appears again in the newest main sequels, Scarlet & Violet), but Legends: Arceus paired the freedom of exploration with great new monster-catching mechanics that emphasized stealth, and fresh battle ideas too!



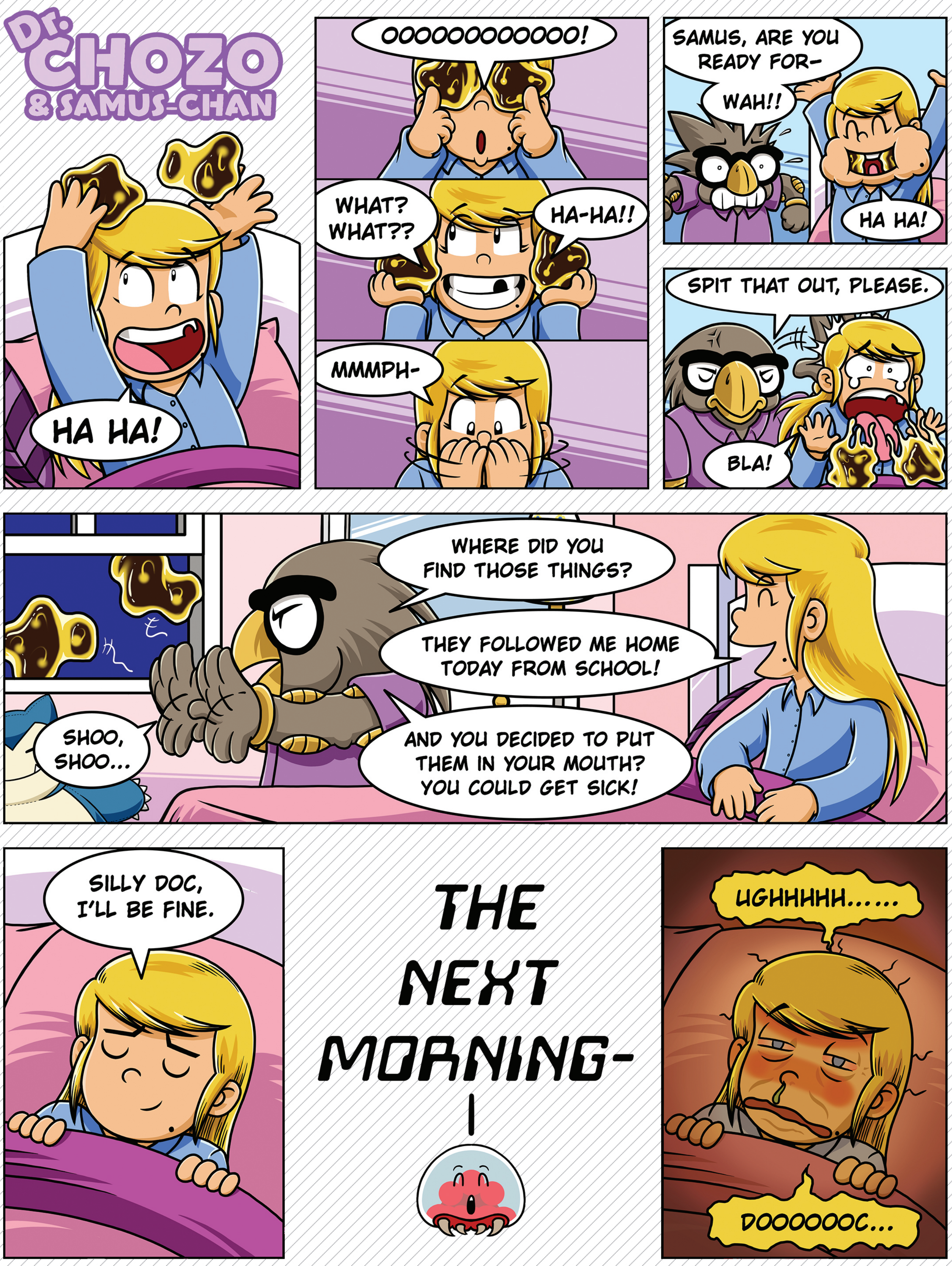
BEST DLC
MONSTER HUNTER RISE: SUNBREAK

If DLC is best defined as expanding an experience that players already adore, then Capcom's got DLC development absolutely dialed in for the Monster Hunter series. More monsters, more weapons, more difficulty – Sunbreak's got everything fans crave, then more!

THE 2022 NINTENDO FORCE GAME OF THE YEAR

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: SHREDDER'S REVENGE

Raekwon and Ghostface Killah said it best: "We ain't came to lose." The New York natives know how to properly praise the Foot-fighting skills of the ninja heroes living in the sewers beneath their feet – and having an original song by actual Wu-Tang Clan members is just one of the ways that the all-new Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge soared above and beyond all of our expectations. When this game was first announced, I think most old TMNT fans were simply happy to see that the Turtles we originally met over three decades ago were making a long-overdue comeback – few likely predicted that this comeback would actually come in the form of the greatest TMNT video game ever made! Its sprite art is pristine, perfectly capturing the look and feel of the 1987 toon. Its soundtrack (beyond Wu-Tang's contribution) is packed with sensational chiptunes by famed composer Tee Lopes, who expertly paid homage to the best TMNT tunes of the past while blazing a new trail too. Its gameplay brilliantly takes the old Turtles arcade games' foundation and builds on it with 30 more years' worth of beat-'em-up genre refinements. It has the original voice actors! It is, in all ways, a triumph.



BY THOR THORVALDSON

FIRE EMBLEM ENGAGE

It's time to head back to the battlefield – but you won't have to fight alone!

NO ONE SHOULD go to war alone.

The Fire Emblem franchise is about to debut another all-new sequel, and at this point in the series' history, its developers at Intelligent Systems like to focus each new entry on some core idea that drives the story – and often ends up being reflected in the game's name! Most recently we got Fire Emblem: Three Houses, which held a story that went in wildly different directions depending on the seemingly simple choice of which students your professor character would teach. Before that was Fire Emblem Fates, which also diverged onto totally separate paths if you choose to stay with the adoptive family who raised you or return to the blood relatives who'd lost you as a child. Awakening? Well, that game involved . . . you know, let's not get into spoilers there.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYS. RELEASE: JANUARY 20, 2023 RATING: T

Fire Emblem Engage also advertises its most central feature in its name, but this time around it seems to be more gameplay-focused. This new sequel is all about the Emblem Rings – the quest to find and claim them all, and the utility they provide in battle of letting your heroes never have to go to war alone.

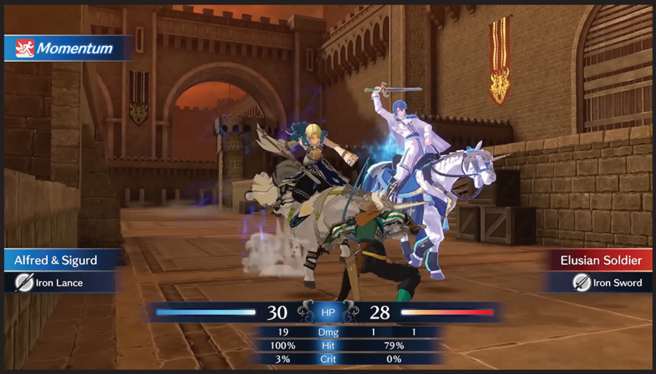
A TOTAL SLEEPYHEAD

At the very beginning of The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, we hear the princess calling out to the hero: "Open your eyes." We quickly discover that the Link in that game has been asleep for 100 years! He's spent a full century in a stasis pod, recovering from some terrible injuries he sustained in the great war against Ganon an age ago.

. . . Link's got nothing on Alear.

The hero of Fire Emblem Engage, when this game begins, awakens from a slumber of *1,000 years!* Alear – whom you can choose to be either male or female – is a Divine Dragon, and they participated in an ancient battle against the villainous Fell Dragon a full millennium ago. They were put to sleep at some point following that conflict, and now that the Fell Dragon is once again threatening the world of the present, Alear has been awakened to once again lead the charge against the evil beast.

Alear is suffering from amnesia after taking such a long nap – because of course they are – and details about their history will come to light as the story of Engage progresses. But one critical piece of their memory seems to remain intact: They know how to use the legendary Emblem Rings, and those will be the key to victory.



IF YOU LIKE IT, PUT A RING ON IT

Fire Emblem games are focused on turn-based tactical battles. Each fight you face plays out across a battlefield separated into squares – and like a game of chess, every one of your characters (or "units") has his or her own way of moving across the map, as well as a unique method of attacking opponents.

There are swordfighters who run into battle on foot, then clash blades with enemies right in front of their face. There are archers who can hang back at a safe distance, firing arrows without fear of an immediate counterattack from their target. There are horse riders who can gallop across greater distances, spellcasters who can conjure all kinds of magical calamities and even soldiers who ride on flying beasts like wyverns to fully avoid any obstacles on the ground.

In most Fire Emblem games, these distinctions between units were all you really had to remember when making a plan of attack. But in Engage, each and every one of your heroes could potentially become two heroes in one.

The Emblem Rings you find in this game are equippable items that each contain the spirit of a classic Fire Emblem character from an older game. So if you equip one – the most basic example being main character Alear putting on the ring that summons the original face of the series, Marth – then those two heroes will appear as a two-in-one joint unit on the battlefield. Alear will rush into a swordfight with a foe, and Marth, as a floating ghost-like ally, will hover right beside them and take a few swipes with his own sword as well. It's a guaranteed way to do a lot of extra damage with an action that still counts as a single attack on your turn.

But that's just tapping into a piece of the potential of the Emblem Rings! There's another level beyond that simple "Sync" – the titular "Engage" gameplay mechanic. If you choose to have a hero Engage with one of the Emblem Rings, then you'll trigger a totally over-the-top fusion sequence! Like Goku and Vegeta joining forces to become Gogeta in Dragon Ball Z, the Engaged forms in this game are fully merged fighters fusing the strength of two separate warriors into just one body.

. . . For a little while, at least. These fusions last for only three turns at a time – so be sure to move quickly!

LEARNING FROM LEGENDS

Triggering the Engaged forms will give your units incredible attacking power, unique techniques to boost the abilities of your other allies, special magic spells to cast and much more. But not all of the benefits disappear after the three-turn time limit runs out – being bonded with these legendary heroes can also have lasting effects, like permanent stat boosts. After all, if you fought right by Marth's side in a dozen different battles, you'd probably learn a thing or two about better sword-fighting, right?

We know that the main quest of Fire Emblem Engage involves finding 12 different Emblem Rings – and we also know which 12 classic characters have their spirits living within them. Let's check out the list!

Marth is first, of course: He's the hero from the very first Fire Emblem game and has appeared several times since, though he gained most of his notoriety in the West from his starring roles in the Super Smash Bros. series. His counterpart from Melee, Roy, is another Emblem here – even though North America has still never gotten an official localization of Roy's own Fire Emblem game from the GBA.

Falling into a similar category are Sigurd, from Genealogy of the Holy War, and Leif, from Thracia 776. Both of those were Fire Emblem games in the SNES era, but they never came to America – so players of Engage in the West might not have much nostalgia for either of them. The remaining eight all hail from games that did get English releases, though. Lyn, from the first FE game that got a localization; Ike and Micaiah, from the GameCube generation; and Eirika from Sacred Stones (and maybe also her twin brother Ephraim?) all represent the second of the series' three decades of history. And then four we've met within the last 10 years round out the roster: Lucina from Awakening, Corrin from Fates, Celica from Echoes and Byleth from Three Houses.

Each and every one of those dozen famous faces can be combined with all the new heroes we'll meet in the all-new world of Elyos, and it'll be exciting to see what all the different fused forms look and play like!

But then Engage will dig even deeper into FE nostalgia with Bond Rings: rings of lesser power that each have a picture of a more obscure old hero character. Like Smash Spirits!

JEWELRY JEALOUSY

Having access to all of those different Emblem Rings is sure to be incredible – but, unfortunately, Alear and their allies won't be the only ones who are able to wield them. You'll have to find and fight some enemy characters who got to a few of the Emblems first . . . and who are more than happy to use their power for nefarious means!

This is probably the most exciting story point in Engage for me. "Call upon heroes from the past!" has been done before in the Fire Emblem series – I mean, it's the entire driving force of the Fire Emblem Heroes mobile game. But flipping that idea around and having these famous faces serve as heels is intriguing – especially with recruiting them to your cause serving as the reward. Yes, having the might of Ike on your team would be great! But can you first *beat* Ike when he's under the influence of evil? We'll find out!

SOARING TO SOMNIEL

Garreg Mach was a little too much to manage.

I enjoyed my time playing Fire Emblem: Three Houses, but like I mentioned in our last issue, I never tackled any more than a single one of its stories. Part of the reason was I just ran out of time! All of the between-battles stuff – running around the academy grounds, tracking down individual students to talk to, having tons of teatimes – ended up eating away too many of my allotted hours, such that I only ever got to experience the Golden Deer storyline.

Engage appears to be streamlining a lot of that kind of content. The home base of this quest is not a sprawling monastery and connected school, but rather a seemingly reasonably contained floating island in the sky called Somniel. (How you move a whole army back and forth from there beats me!)

Somniel will be home to all of the extraneous activities we've come to know and love – plus a few more! You'll be able to shop for items and weapons to prepare your troops for the next battle. You'll be able to shop for cosmetic items to alter the looks of your characters, as well as visit the amiibo Gazebo to tap Fire Emblem series figures and add their outfits to your closet too. You'll be able to pet a money-pooping dog!

. . . Yes, you read that right. There's a dog (at least I think it's a dog?) that lives on the island of Somniel named Sommie. If you give it a few pets from time to time, it'll be so thankful that it will literally poop out Bond Fragments, which you can then use to make more Bond Rings and further power up your fighting forces. It always pays to be kind to animals!

Except fish. You don't have to be kind to fish. You're free to playing the fishing minigame as often as you like, and pluck as many piscine species out of the water as you can!

You can have conversations with allies around the island. You can sit down and have meals with them. You can tackle mock battles to raise your experience points, do some strength-training exercises for stat boosts, build your own battlefield maps and . . .

. . . You know what? I take it back. Somniel's got just as much going on as the old Officers Academy. At least its physical land area seems smaller, so you shouldn't have too much trouble navigating to all of its many diferent points of interest.

RINGING IN THE NEW YEAR

There's just something that feels right about playing a brand-new Fire Emblem game in the wintertime. Fire Emblem Awakening launched in February back in 2013, as did Fates three years later. Three Houses was a July game – maybe that's why I didn't end up having enough time to play it all? For these really dense, in-depth strategy RPG experiences, I think I need the warmth of snuggling up inside and hiding from the winter weather to be able to really get myself invested.

So it's great that Fire Emblem Engage is on its way on January 20! I plan to grab the comfiest blanket in the house, pour myself a mug full of hot cocoa and then get fully swept away into this latest world of tactics while I'm all wrapped up like a toasty cinnamon bun.

. . . In fact, that sounds so inviting that I might not be able to wait! Maybe I'll use the final weeks before Engage arrives to do a replay of Awakening. It would only be appropriate, in order to bring the whole first decade of making NF totally full-circle! Now, where's that blanket . . . **– LUCAS**

DISNEY ILLUSION ISLAND

Grab three friends and dive into New Super Mickey Bros.!

MICKEY MOUSE IS getting old.

We may be celebrating our 10th birthday with this issue, but Disney's famous mascot is closing in on his 100th! He'll turn 95 here in 2023, and you just know the company's going to be ramping up his appearances across all forms of media through the next half a decade as the major milestone grows ever closer.

And it seems like that ramp-up may be starting on the Switch! Disney has tasked the developers at Dlala Studios to craft an all-new adventure for Mickey and his pals Minnie, Donald and Goofy.

Dlala is the team that recently rebooted the Battletoads brand over on the Xbox side of the industry. Their take on the Toads was a three-player co-op experience in which each of the three different characters had his own unique style of play. Illusion Island is tapping into that same kind of idea, as this is also a co-op game, and each of the four friends seems to have a skill or two that is all their own!

Now, we don't have full details on that yet, but we have a few clues here and there. In the screen above, for example, Minnie is dropping a rope down for the boys to grab onto and climb. That ability may be exclusive to Minnie, meaning that whoever plays as her could have the trailblazing role of going first when scaling tall walls. The other characters would compensate with their own powers – Donald seems like the swiftest swimmer, for instance – and all together, they'll be well suited to tackle any challenge they come across as a team.

Disney and Dlala's use of the word "Illusion" in the name is intentionally nostalgia-driven, though Nintendo loyalists might not notice that as quickly as Sega stalwarts. Beginning with Castle of Illusion back in 1990, there was a whole series of games starring Mickey and Donald on Sega's systems. The last new Illusion game we got on a Nintendo platform was Epic Mickey: Power of Illusion for the 3DS, which we just happened to review in NF #1! (It wasn't all that great: a 6/10.) Here's hoping Illusion Island ends up being a bit better than that!

I have early confidence it will, just by looking at its winning style that honors Mickey's cartoon legacy, as well as the fact that the adventure appears to be fully voice-acted. This should be like playing a real Mickey cartoon! Those older Illusion games kind of tried to capture that magic, but a few extra decades of technological advancements should help the old illusions turn into real realities.

Disney Illusion Island is still "TBD" as far as a release date goes, but let's hope it's sooner than later! **– LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: DISNEY INTERACTIVE
DEVELOPER: DLALA STUDIOS
RELEASE: TBA 2023 RATING: RP

TALES OF SYMPHONIA REMASTERED

The GameCube classic is making a comeback.

JRPG FANS WERE starving.

Honestly, in hindsight, I'm a little bit upset about it. The SNES library had been jam-packed with role-playing greats – games that have gone on to be remembered as legendary in the genre, like Breath of Fire, EarthBound, Chrono Trigger, Final Fantasy III (a.k.a. VI) and Secret of Mana. And Nintendo even rounded out that era by having Mario himself headline his own epic: Super Mario RPG! By that point, we all were fully conditioned to know that Nintendo = great JRPG gaming.

. . . But after the feast, a famine.

When Nintendo held fast to the cartridge format for the N64 hardware, JRPG developers flocked instead to Sony's PlayStation and its cheaper-to-manufacture CDs. Role-playing games have really large worlds! Tons of songs and settings and cutscenes. Packing all of that content onto a cartridge was more cumbersome and more expensive to do, so big names like Square and Enix took their massive games to the platform that would offer them larger profits. For the entirety of the N64 era, JRPGs were almost entirely absent from Nintendo's ecosystem.

Namco was the company to finally capitalize. Recognizing Nintendo fans were desperate for JRPG content as the N64 gave way to the GameCube, they decided to toss us a bone.

Tales of Symphonia launched as a GameCube exclusive in July 2004. It was immediately embraced – and not just because it was one of the first real RPGs Nintendo loyalists had seen in the better part of a decade! It was a genuinely great game, and one that stood proudly against all other JRPGs of the day, regardless of platform.

This early entry in the "Tales of" saga focuses its tale on the world of Sylvarant – a world currently dying due to a dwindling supply of mana.

. . . A mana famine, if you will.

In order to save the world, the Chosen One must set out on a quest – and it's up to you to protect her on the way. From that simple starting point, though, Tales of Symphonia expands its scope and ultimately encompasses a story of prejudice, loss and morality in conflict. It's not the happy-go-lucky cartoon it first seems to be on the surface!

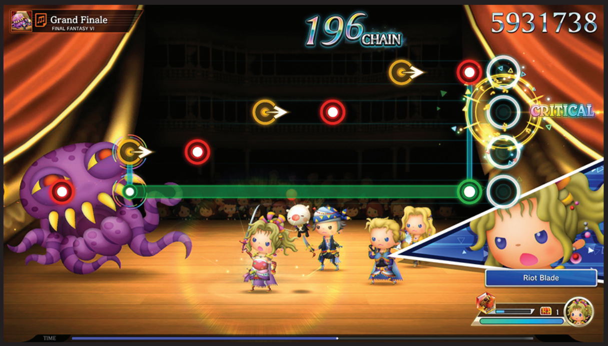
Which makes it ironic, perhaps, that another of its high points is its cast of voice actors, including Scott Menville (known best as Robin from Teen Titans) and Tara Strong (Teen Titans' Raven, The Powerpuff Girls' Bubbles, Batgirl and many more).

Decades later we're still dealing with vocal silence in major games like Pokémon Scarlet & Violet; Symphonia was way ahead of its time!

Also setting this adventure apart is its battle system, which centers on real-time combat with direct character control. No picking attacks from a menu! Nothing turn-based about it.

So Tales of Symphonia certainly has enough hooks in it to nab the interest of JRPG fans once again, and its fresh HD facelift for this Remastered release will be the cherry on top for sure. But role-playing gamers are incredibly well fed on Switch already – will it find an audience again when we're not all still starving? **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: BANDAI NAMCO RELEASE: FEBRUARY 17, 2023 RATING: T



THEATRHYTHM FINAL BAR LINE

Battling to the beat is coming back.

THE FIRST THEATRHYTHM was a real peanut butter & chocolate moment when it first hit the 3DS in 2012: Using iconic songs from over 30 years of Final Fantasy history was a shockingly perfect fit for a rhythm game that no one saw coming! Since then, the series has really come into its own. It's even had an arcade cabinet in Japan!

The fan-favorite series marks its grand return to home consoles with Theatrhythm Final Bar Line. (It wouldn't be a true Final Fantasy spin-off without a lengthy name, after all!) This new game promises over 385 songs from all core Final Fantasy entries and spin-offs, and even assorted tracks from LIVE A LIVE, NieR, Octopath and composer Nobuo Uematsu's cover band, The Black Mages!

It sounds like many of the key features return in this entry, but there are also new attractions including four-player multiplayer modes and mission-based quests to take advantage of the boosted tech of HD consoles. Square Enix promises an accessible control scheme, but we're most interested to see how this translates to a standard controller, since the 3DS utilized stylus controls and the arcade cabinet uses proprietary knobs. Kingdom Hearts: Melody of Memory found a fairly straightforward way to mash through songs in a Theatrhythm-inspired setup, so it might be safe to assume Final Bar Line will settle on something close to that experience.

With this jump to consoles, the series is poised to strike it big with rhythm gamers and FF fans alike. Hopefully kicking back and relaxing with some classic tunes will provide the perfect break in-between late-night XP grinds when it drops in February. **— JOHN-CHARLES**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RELEASE: FEBRUARY 16, 2023 RATING: T

TRINITY TRIGGER

They know just what they're doing with that name.

EARLY 2023 WILL bring a host of new JRPG releases, including anticipated new titles and nostalgic remasters/ports. Upcoming action RPG Trinity Trigger will land somewhere in the middle of those experiences, as it's a new game that takes a lot of inspiration from the past.

Trinity Trigger aims to capture the essence of RPGs from the '90s, according to publisher XSEED, and it features staff members who've worked on the Mana, Xenoblade and Octopath series.

At first glance, the Mana series similarities are the most evident. Trinity Trigger has fast-paced action combat, a ring-shaped menu to access different options in battle, local co-op for up to three players and an adorable art style complete with cute creatures.

The game takes place on the continent of Trinitia, which was once ravaged by a long-running conflict between the Gods of Order and the Gods of Chaos. Eventually, the two groups decided to choose warriors to fight their battles instead, and that's where we find protagonist Cyan Elreius, who's been chosen to serve as a Warrior of Chaos.

Cyan's not too happy with his fate, and he's joined by Elise Quois, who wants to put a stop to the war for good, and Zantis Gheldyne, who promises to protect Cyan. On their journey, the three heroes are accompanied by creatures called Triggers, who can transform into different weapons. So far footage has shown the trio wielding swords, bows, lances and axes.

Combat centers around using the different weapons to discover enemy weaknesses, and players can also execute charged attacks and rolling dodges to get an edge.

Trinity Trigger released in Japan in September and will make its way West on Switch in Spring 2023. If you're longing for a new RPG experience that will transport you back a few decades, maybe give Trinity Trigger a shot! **— MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: XSEED GAMES DEVELOPER: FURYU RELEASE: Q1 2023 RATING: RP

THE LEGEND OF HEROES: TRAILS TO AZURE

The further adventures of the Special Support Section.

THOSE WHO DISCOVERED Crossbell City and all its mysteries in Trails from Zero won't have to wait too long for a return trip!

Trails from Zero's sequel, Trails to Azure, will arrive March 14 on Nintendo Switch. Together these two games comprise the Crossbell arc in Nihon Falcom's long-running Trails JRPG series. (With that said, play Trails from Zero first, as many storylines and characters return in this sequel.)

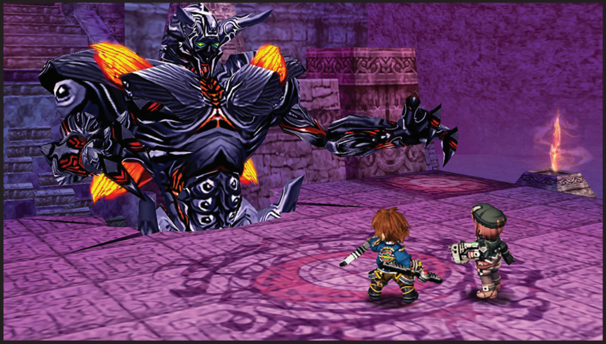
Trails to Azure takes place months after Trails from Zero. The Crossbell Police Department's Special Support Section went their separate ways after stopping a major threat to the city, and plenty of changes come when they reunite. For starters, two new members join! Wazy Hemisphere, former leader of the delinquent group the Testaments, and Noel Seeker, a sergeant major in the Crossbell Guardian Force, accompany the four original members: Lloyd Bannings, Elie MacDowell, Tio Plato and Randy Orlando.

They'll have their hands full as tensions rise between the Republic of Calvard and the Erebonian Empire during the West Zemuria Trade Conference held in Crossbell.

Trails to Azure continues to use the series' AT Battle System, where you manipulate the turn order in combat, use character-specific abilities called Crafts and cast elemental Arts. But it will have some new features this time around! The Burst mechanic has a gauge you fill up, and can be activated to heal, buff and improve turn order. You can also equip characters with Master Quartz, which offers stat boosts and new Master Arts.

Trails from Zero wonderfully set the stage for what's to come, leaving plenty of secrets to unravel in Trails to Azure. I can't wait to see what's in store! — **MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NIS AMERICA DEVELOPERS: NIHON FALCOM & THE GEOFRONT RELEASE: MARCH 14, 2023 RATING: T



DIGIMON WORLD: NEXT ORDER

It's been six years, but better late than never!

MORE AND MORE Digimon games are finding a new home on the Nintendo Switch!

In 2019, Digimon Story: Cyber Sleuth and its sequel Hacker's Memory received Switch ports, and Digimon Survive launched on the system last July. (You can see our review of it on Page 73.)

2023 will continue this trend with the release of Digimon World: Next Order on February 22. The game initially released on Vita in 2016 in Japan and came West in 2017 for the PlayStation 4.

The Digimon World series focuses on raising Digimon above all else, and the player's bond with their Digimon affects combat and the world around them. Next Order features a male or female protagonist, who is transported to the Digital World and chooses two Digimon partners to join them on their journey (from a total of 10 different choices!).

The game includes more than 230 Digimon, with unique personalities and lifespans, to find, recruit and raise. Digimon partners will die and return to their egg forms on occasion, but will get stat bonuses when they're reborn. The process is ongoing throughout the game.

Digimon will also take part in battles as you explore. Combat involves real-time A.I. battles, where Digimon attack on their own. You can issue commands and change tactics to excel in battle.

The new Switch release will feature a new Beginner difficulty mode and a running option to traverse the world more easily. If you're a longtime Digimon fan or looking for another monster collecting experience, keep an eye out for this one! — **MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO DEVELOPERS: B.B. STUDIO & HYDE RELEASE: FEBRUARY 22, 2023 RATING: E10+

FITNESS BOXING: FIST OF THE NORTH STAR

"You have already lost weight."

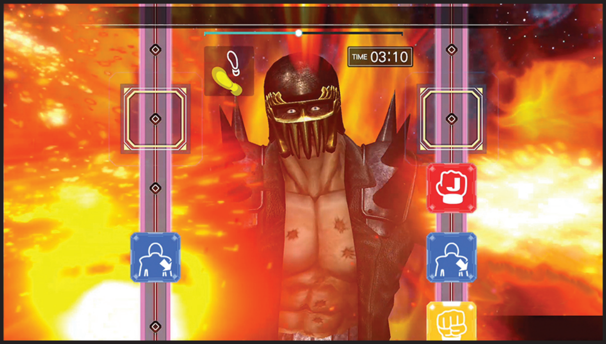
THE CONQUEST OF Nobunaga's Ambition, but with Pokémon. The worlds of Disney, linked via a complex Final Fantasy narrative. Firearm combat, featuring the combined might of Mario and the Rabbids. While gaming crossovers aren't all that unusual, some unions seem so inconceivable at first that you wonder how they made it through the design pitch. Well, temper your disbelief once more, as the next installment in Imagineer's Fitness Boxing series will be headlined by '80s battle manga Fist of the North Star!

Fitness Boxing is actually one of the more successful exergaming franchises in recent memory, with the first two titles on Switch each managing to join the vaunted million-seller club. In retrospect, it's not a surprising outcome – it basically does for shadow boxing what Just Dance does for choreographed dance routines. But while Ubisoft sought the candy-coated Yo-kai Watch for its anime cross-promotion, Imagineer opted for a gritty "post-apocalyptic" flavor.

When you think about it, the martial arts shenanigans of roaming warrior Kenshiro do make for appropriate window dressing. Instead of pop hits like "Call Me Maybe" and "What Makes You Beautiful," Ken will guide you to the rhythm of legendary theme song "Ai o Torimodose!!" (ya know, "YOU WA SHOCK!") and other tunes off the anime's soundtrack. Aside from the usual daily and free exercise programs, battle mode allows you to launch the furious Hundred Crack Fist against series antagonists. Beating these opponents will even unlock them as new trainers.

If that all sounds like a wild workout, prepare for your fists to fly sometime in March. **– TONY**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: IMAGINEER RELEASE: MARCH 2023 RATING: RP



ATELIER RYZA 3: ALCHEMIST OF THE END & THE SECRET KEY

Ryza's all set to set sail . . . for her final adventure?

ATELIER SERIES GAMES often come in threes, and the sub-series starring spunky fan favorite Reisalin "Ryza" Stout will be no exception! Atelier Ryza 3: Alchemist of the End & the Secret Key will arrive on Switch in February. It's a sequel to the first two Ryza games and will feature her "final summer adventure," according to Koei Tecmo's website.

Ryza 3 will boast one of Atelier's largest settings, with an open field of connected maps that will not require loading times as you explore. Players will navigate this world by swimming, climbing, ziplining and riding beasts on land and in water.

Also, the game will include a larger cast than most Atelier games, with 11 members. These include Ryza, Lent, Klaudia and Tao, who've been with the series since the beginning; returning allies like Patricia Abelheim and Lila Decyrus, and some new characters.

Ryza and friends are living on Kurken Island when a mysterious new group of islands appears. To save their home, they will launch an investigation that coincides with the roots of alchemy.

Like the previous games, Ryza 3 will feature a crafting system (a.k.a. synthesis) and real-time combat. From the gameplay footage I've seen so far, Ryza 3's combat looks faster and flashier than the games before it.

Ryza 3 will also introduce a new gameplay mechanic involving keys. As you play, you'll find different types of keys that can aid in exploring the world, crafting items and fighting enemies.

With its vast open world, large cast and new and updated mechanics, Ryza 3 is shaping up to be one of the most ambitious Atelier games to date – and a worthy conclusion to Ryza's story! **– MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: KOEI TECMO DEVELOPER: GUST RELEASE: FEBRUARY 24, 2023 RATING: T

OCTOPATH TRAVELER II

An all-new set of eight heroes are about to cross paths with one another!

BACK IN ISSUE #39, we first revealed the development of a sequel to Octopath Traveler along with the initial announcement of the mobile spin-off, Champions of the Continent (see our review on Page 24). Almost three years later, the world of Octopath Traveler II and its eight travelers was revealed during this past September's Nintendo Direct, and Square Enix has been releasing teaser trailers for each of the characters leading up to the game's release on February 23.

Instead of the high fantasy medieval world of Osterra, the world of Solistia exists in an era mirroring that of the late 19th century: There are pockets of advanced technology, such as railroads and steam power in the mining villages of the volcanic Wildlands, as well as places like the deserts of Hinoeuma where warlords clash over water and other precious resources. However, magic still exists in many parts of the world, and is widely studied.

The world map is divided in half by a great ocean, and at one point in the story your party will be able to equip their own ship – a huge, multi-sail craft that can be customized with different colored sails and emblems – that you can use to cross the ocean, as well as explore uncharted islands and shipwrecks. There's also water exploration on a smaller scale – many of the settlements and the surrounding areas, like the jungles of Ochette's homeland, are connected by rivers, which your party can traverse using their own canoes.

Everything is rendered in much more detail than in the original Octopath Traveler as well – there are various different camera angles, lighting and other fancy graphics that really bring the world to life, most likely thanks to games like Triangle Strategy and LIVE A LIVE and the advances they've brought to the trademark HD-2D art style. There's also a new day and night cycle, which is toggled by a press of the ZR Button, which changes not only the look of the scenery, but the Path Actions that each playable character can use.

While the battle system will largely be the same as the original, there is one new addition to your arsenal: Latent Powers, which are represented by a meter that slowly fills as you Break an enemy's defense or take damage. They appear to be specific to each character, but it would be interesting to see them included with equippable character classes.

Finally, the developers listened to fan feedback and included a feature that many thought was sorely needed in the original: Crossed Paths, where two characters are able to embark on a sidequest together. In one involving Osvald and Partitio, the two men encounter an astronomer acquaintance of Osvald, and spend time assisting him with his research. For another example, Hikari and Agnea can take on a quest in which they'll encounter a traditional musician during their travels in Hikari's homeland.

These deeper interactions extend into battle, as this sequel will feature some inter-party banter between team members.

We've featured the eight travelers and their revealed powers on the following page, and while they have the same character classes as the original, they have an all-new mix of personalities, backstories and motivations. You won't need much knowledge of the original to truly appreciate Octopath Traveler II – it's designed to be accessible to new fans from the ground up. **– REBECCA**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RELEASE: FEBRUARY 24, 2023 RATING: T

THE HUNTER
OCHETTE

A young woman with furry pointed ears, a black button nose and a fluffy tail, Ochette is some sort of wolf/human hybrid, a first for the franchise. She is an adept hunter who's a sure shot with a bow, and she's never seen without one of her faithful animal friends – either a red wolf or a great snowy owl – close by her side.

Ochette spends her days in the jungle, hunting big game (like dinosaurs!) and sharing her spoils with the other creatures that call the jungle home. Her Path Actions will likely mirror those of H'aanit from the original game, meaning she'll be able to sic her animal friends on villagers, and trap enemies in battle to use their powers later. But her best asset may be her winning smile!

THE APOTHECARY
CASTTI

One day, Castti wakes up on the deck of a docked ship – with no memory of how she got there. She can only remember her name and her powers as an apothecary! She then embarks on a journey to jog her memory, and hopefully regain at least some sense of who she really is and where she's from.

Castti doesn't hesitate to make her way into dangerous caves to investigate sources of sickness and disease and protect innocent townsfolk. Like Alfyn in the original, she will likely be able to wield axes as well as use found materials to concoct medicines to heal and buff/debuff party members and enemies, as well as gather information from people using Inquire.

Every good JRPG needs to have at least one amnesiac!

THE THIEF
THRONÉ

In the prosperous industrial region of the Brightlands, the Blacksnakes – a guild of ruthless thieves and assassins – rule the underworld, led by the merciless assassin Father and the wicked, whip-wielding Mother. Throné Anguis, a trained assassin from a young age, is looking for any way possible to escape her life of bloodshed and servitude, and she finds it with her fellow travelers.

Throné's clandestine ways benefit the party when night falls – during battles at night, she and her allies start with an attack and speed boost, while her Latent Power, Leave No Trace, allows her to act twice in one turn. Her daytime Path Action, Steal, turns into Ambush at night, allowing her to knock any path-blocking NPCs out cold.

THE SCHOLAR
OSVALD

Osvald V. Vanstein was once a renowned scholar of magic – until he was sent to prison for the murder of his wife and daughter. More than five years into his life sentence on icy Frigit Isle, he plans his escape with the help of his fellow inmates, intent on revenge against fellow scholar Harvey, the man who supposedly framed him.

Like Cyrus in the original game, Osvald can study foes in battle to reveal their weak points, and his daytime Path Action lets him Scrutinize people for information – but at night, he can Mug them for items after defeating them in battle.

When in combat, Osvald's Concentrate Spells skill lets him convert any multi-target spell into a more powerful single-target spell.

THE MERCHANT
PARTITIO

He resembles Dick Tracy! (If Dick Tracy had been a gunslinger in the Wild West.) But Partitio Yellowil is actually a merchant who's lived his life in Oresrush, a silver mining town built from the ground up by his Papp and his Papp's business partner, Roque.

Partitio sets off from his barren, volcanic homeland, intent on bringing prosperity back to his hometown. He puts his business savvy to good use with the Path Actions Purchase during the day and Hire during the night, with the folks he hires allowing him to get discounts on merchandise and bring mercenaries into battle.

Finally, he can use his Latent Power Hoot and Holler to instantly fill another party member's Boost Points and immediately power them up!

THE DANCER
AGNEA

There's nothing more that Agnea Bristarni wants than to follow in her Mama's footsteps and become a dancer renowned around the world. Her home is a humble village in the Leaflands, where she lives with her younger sister, Pala, and works as a dancer in a tavern.

Her daytime Path Action, Allure, allows her to recruit allies, which also feeds into her Dance Session talent that triggers additional effects while in battle. At night, her Path Action becomes Entreat (a mechanic introduced in Champions of the Continent) where she can request valuable items from townsfolk if her level is high enough, and in battle, her All Together Now skill lets multi-targeting of skills extend to the rest of the party.

THE CLERIC
TEMENOS

Temenos Mistral, an easy-going and curious young member of the Order of the Sacred Flame, has been appointed as an inquisitor by Pontiff Jörg into a mysterious and possibly deadly incident that happened within the walls of one of the Sacred Flame's churches.

Temenos' two Path Actions are Guide, which allows him to recruit allies during the day, and Coerce, which allows him to glean information from NPCs after inflicting the Break status on them during conflict. Like Throné, he also has a nocturnal power in battle that allows him to blind enemies and reduce their defenses, and Judgment, his Latent Power, lets him bypass an enemy's usual weaknesses and use any attacks to Break their defenses.

THE WARRIOR
HIKARI

Hikari is the younger of the two princes of Ku, a war-torn kingdom in the parched deserts of Hinoeuma, a society based on samurai era Japan. He wants to bring an end to his countrymen's suffering, which puts him in conflict with his older half-brother, General Mugen, known as the Scarlet Demon of Ku. Despite his peaceful ways, Hikari's able to learn skills from defeated opponents and unleash them in battle, making him a force to be reckoned with! His Latent Power, Shadow's Hold, allows him to perform powerful multi-target attacks. His Path Action by day, Challenge, is the same as Olberic's in the original Octopath Traveler, while his night Path Action allows him to Bribe people for information.

SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS: THE COSMIC SHAKE

It's a wish-granting costume party under the sea!

WHO LIVES IN a pineapple and looks like a cake?

SpongeBob SquarePants!

Who recently had a successful remake?

SpongeBob SquarePants!

Since nautical nonsense makes tons of money . . .

SpongeBob SquarePants!

. . . get ready for one more trip under the sea!

SpongeBob SquarePants!

OK, so whether SpongeBob looks like a cake is debatable (it'd have to be a sponge cake), but there's no denying that video games starring this burger-loving, box-bottomed boy have earned enough cash over the years to buy anyone a lifetime's supply of Krabby Patties.

His most recent release came back in 2020. SpongeBob SquarePants: Battle for Bikini Bottom – Rehydrated was a remake of one of the earliest SpongeBob games, the original Battle for Bikini Bottom from 2003. Whether it was nostalgia for that nearly 20-year-old original or just the continued popularity of the character in cartoons that did it, Rehydrated somehow managed to sell over 2,000,000 copies! That serious level of success then led to this next adventure quickly getting a greenlight.

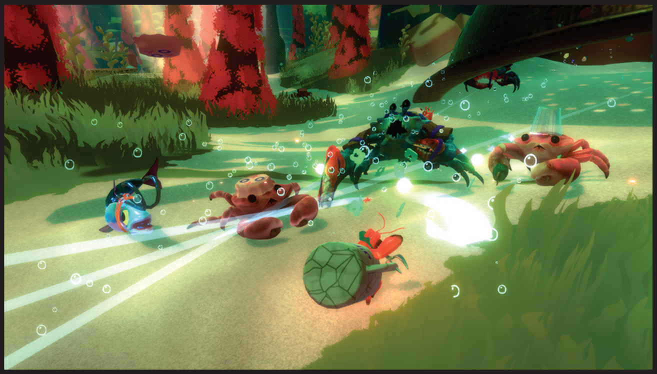
The same developers who crafted Rehydrated have been called upon once again, but this time around they have a tougher job to tackle: making a totally original, all-new SpongeBob adventure! The Cosmic Shake is not another remake, but rather brand-new material from top to bottom. The team has envisioned this as a spiritual sequel to Battle for Bikini Bottom, though, so it probably won't be too radical a departure from the way that one played. (There have just been a couple of playable characters cut.)

Yes, Sally and Patrick have been axed as directly controllable heroes in favor of putting the full focus back on SpongeBob himself. Though he won't always be entirely himself! A closet full of "Cosmic Costumes" will shape-shift our favorite sponge into dozens of different forms. He'll also have to master a multitude of moves (both old and new) in order to make his way through seven Wishworlds, each of which has a unique theme. There's a world of cowboys, a world of pirates, a world of prehistoric snails . . . you know, the usual mix of video game environments. (Just with everything underwater.)

All of these wacky worlds have sprung into existence due to Patrick and SpongeBob being themselves and acting irresponsibly – the two of them somehow came into the possession of some wish-granting Mermaid's Tears and managed to undo the very fabric of reality itself shortly thereafter. (I wouldn't have expected any less!)

While the sales of the Battle for Bikini Bottom remake were incredible, the critical reception toward it was far less kind. So will the developers at Purple Lamp be able to present an adventure that wins over both customers and critics this time around? We'll soon see, on January 31! **– LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: THQ NORDIC
DEVELOPER: PURPLE LAMP
RELEASE: JANUARY 31, 2023 RATING: E10+



ANOTHER CRAB'S TREASURE

The crustacean sensation that's sweeping the nation!

"IT'S LIKE DARK SOULS."

One of the most overused comparisons in video game journalism through the past decade, "it's like Dark Souls" has been said about literally hundreds of titles that have been developed in the years since, well, Dark Souls made its debut. It's a comparison that's been made so often, in fact, that it's lost all meaning at this point – it's just become a kind of shorthand now that really means "Hey, this game is hard."

Dark Souls was difficult. So any newer game that is also difficult must be like Dark Souls.

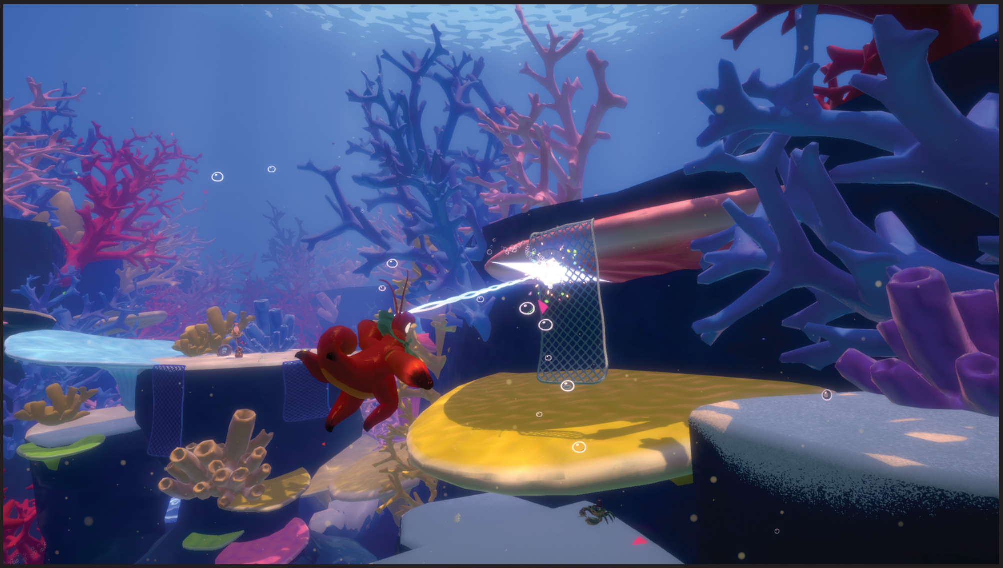
Complicating things further is when developers themselves use this comparison to promote their own releases! Which is where we find ourselves with Another Crab's Treasure.

Like SpongeBob SquarePants: The Cosmic Shake, this upcoming adventure takes place entirely underwater. But the submerged setting may be the only thing these two titles have in common, if indeed Another Crab's Treasure is a "Soulslike." That's how it's being marketed – so that must mean it's incredibly hard, right?

Well, maybe not. The development team at Aggro Crab might have actually taken real inspiration from the gameplay design of the Souls games, but left behind the punishing level of challenge that's overshadowed all the rest of their innovations. The Soulslike-ness of this design seems to center on its combat, which takes the tense sword duels of the dark and twisted Souls titles and recasts the combatants to be colorful cartoon crabs instead.

Our hero is one such crusading crustacean: Kril is a hermit crab who has lost his shell, and so he must set out on a journey to find and reclaim it.

Not wanting to walk around with no protection in the meanwhile, Kril can equip just about anything laying around and use it as a temporary shell – he's got no qualms about wearing a discarded aluminum can, a tossed-out teacup or even an empty tin of Spam to keep his backside safe.



The common thread to all of those things: They're all garbage! It seems like in addition to being a video game adventure, Another Crab's Treasure will also serve as social commentary to spread the message that Earth's oceans are becoming increasingly polluted with every passing day. It's actually not such a fanciful idea to think that communities of crabs and other aquatic species are living their lives in the midst of human refuse.

The shells aren't just for looks! With something like a cylindrical soda can on his back, Kril will be able to retreat from battle or dodge out of the way of incoming attacks by hiding fully inside his current piece of garbage and rolling to one side or another. He'll then be able to maneuver, find an opening and counterattack with his . . . what is that? A can opener?

Gameplay isn't all battle-focused, though, as Kril will also spend plenty of time exploring wide-open spaces under the sea, using movement techniques like climbing up bits of netting or zipping across large horizontal stretches with a tool that seems most similar to the Hookshot from several of Link's adventures.

Another Crab's Treasure is just the second game from this development team, but it looks like it's on track to be one incredible sophomore effort. After all, the team named themselves Aggro Crab, and they've rightly determined that people want more crabs in their video games! . . . But maybe not Dark Souls-level difficulty. Let's hope this isn't that. **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: AGGRO CRAB RELEASE: TBA 2023 RATING: RP

BY JOHN-CHARLES HOLMES

RETRO

LET THE LUIGI CELEBRATION BEGIN AGAIN!

MARIO BROS.
ARCADE, 1983

As I mentioned earlier in this issue, 2013 was the "Year of Luigi" in connection with the 30th anniversary of his first appearance in 1983's Mario Bros. arcade game. Well, that means that here in 2023, we're now heading for his 40th! Might as well make this another Year of Luigi then, huh? To kick off the festivities anew, here's a look back at that first appearance. Mario Bros. was a two-player cooperative/competitive game design: You could work in partnership with a second player to topple turtles and clobber crabs, but you could also decide to fight against one another and actively sabotage the other brother. Luigi at first existed as just a palette swap of Mario, but he found his own personality over time! **— LUCAS**

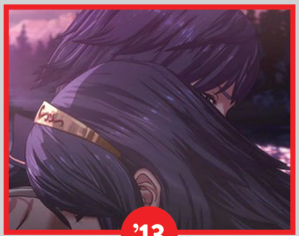
CHARACTER PROFILE
LUCINA

At first she masqueraded as Marth, but since then she's more than established her own identity as one of Fire Emblem's finest heroes!

FIRST APPEARANCE
FIRE EMBLEM AWAKENING
(3DS, 2013)

CAREER HIGHS

Later on in the story of Awakening, the truth comes out: Lucina is not Marth from the past, but rather Chrom's daughter from the future!



'13

After Awakening, Lucina quickly overshadowed her dear old Dad in the fandom, even making the cut as a playable Smash fighter before him.

'14

Lucina's popularity quickly matched Marth's, though. She earned her own amiibo and a cameo alongside him in Code Name: S.T.E.A.M.!

'15

Sharing the Awakening boxart with her father Chrom and sharing her identity with Fire Emblem's original hero Marth linked Lucina to the both of them from the beginning of her video game career, but a decade later she's separated herself a bit.

'23

Her next appearance will be as one of the summonable Emblem characters in Fire Emblem Engage – an honor given only to a handful of heroes from the series' history! (Though Marth is the lead Emblem, naturally.)

CAREER LOWS

'13

Lucina burst onto the scene as an incredibly capable swordfighter, but at first all credit went to "Marth," since she'd assumed his persona.

'14

Unfortunately, ironically and perhaps poetically, though, Lucina didn't get her own moveset in Smash. She was just a clone of . . . Marth! (Of course.)

'18

Still, it wasn't enough to set her apart in Smash. In Ultimate, she was designated as Marth's Echo Fighter, rather than getting her own fighter number.

HIGHLIGHTS

FIRE EMBLEM AWAKENING
3DS, 2013

One full decade is long enough to be fully open with spoilers, right? Lucina's true identity isn't revealed until halfway through Awakening's main campaign, when she confirms that she's from the future and traveled back in time to fight alongside her farther, Chrom. Though you get to pick who her mother ends up being as you play!

SUPER SMASH BROS. FOR Wii U & NINTENDO 3DS
Wii U & 3DS, 2014

It was encouraging for Lucina fans to see her fiercely fighting in her Smash intro trailer while Papa Chrom was passed out on the floor. Finally, a triumph over one of the men with whom she'd had to share the spotlight! Though that trailer ended with her getting bailed out by another man, Robin, so the spotlight still wasn't all hers.

FIRE EMBLEM ENGAGE
SWITCH, 2023

I mentioned in our preview earlier that not all of the Emblem characters in Engage are going to be good guys – at least not at first. And we have evidence pointing to Lucina actually being on the side of evil when you first meet her! Alear will face off against her while she's bonded with a Pegasus Knight. A perfect chance for her to cross blades with Marth in a new way!

BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

WHAT A TWIST!

SECRETLY A WOMAN

In Return of the Jedi, Princess Leia dressed up as a male bounty hunter in order to infiltrate Jabba's palace. That was in 1983 – and whether directly inspired by Star Wars or not, Nintendo started having its female stars pull the same trick shortly thereafter. 1985's Mach Rider appeared to be a motorcycle-riding man, but its ending implies a woman was the Rider all along. Then Metroid's NES instruction manual specifically used male pronouns for Samus in order to hide the surprise that underneath that armor was another leading lady! So Lucina wearing a mask and pretending to be a man for a while before revealing her true self was also her joining a whole club of other characters who'd done the same thing!

"I believe that we can fight to change our fates."

- FIRE EMBLEM HEROES (MOBILE, 2017)

WARP ZONE

What Nintendo Power was writing about way back when.

RINGING IN THE New Year with the 104th issue of Nintendo Power for January 1998 was none other than Yoshi's Story on the cover. And inside that very cover, you were then treated to a decapitated Bowser head on a dinner plate with the assurance that "this time," you could "have *him* for lunch."

It was a different time.

As far as servings go, the main course of this issue's N64 smorgasbord was eight pages of Yoshi's Story coverage, with a massive 10-page helping of WCW vs. nWo: World Tour on the side. Other dishes included Snowboard Kids, Wetrix, Duke Nukem 64 (which shared poster space with Yoshi's Story), Diddy Kong Racing, Jeopardy and Fighter's History. Those who had to take their meals to go found themselves with a menu consisting of eight pages of Turok: Battle of the Bionosaurs, with side orders of The Fidgetts and The Lost World: Jurassic Park on Game Boy.

Other courses included the scoop on all the latest news out of Nintendo Space World '97 (complete with a garnish of a bizarre Pikachu mascot costume from the upcoming Pocket Monsters), more Zelda 64, the Mario Paint successor Mario Artist and "A Miyamoto Moment," wherein the future Creative Fellow dished about Super Mario RPG 2 and the next F-Zero, a series that would no doubt last far into the future – well past dessert, we're sure.

Speaking of dessert, this January issue featured the customary subscriber-exclusive bonuses, such as an NP '98 Datebook, an "Nput" phone challenge contest and previews for F-Zero X, Turok 2, NBA Courtside, Konami's "Dracula 3-D," Earthworm Jim 3D, Quest 64, Forsaken, the Top 64 Tips for N64, a Dan Owsen Q&A and predictions for 1998 with Taj, the genie from Diddy Kong Racing (but he was dead wrong about wrestling on pay-per-view that year).

Plus, in a bout of generosity you won't often see today, Nintendo provided two $5-off coupons: one for Tetrisphere, the other for Mischief Makers. An attempt at boosting sagging sales, or bolstering two less-recognizable-but-deserving titles? You be the judge! Either way, as the nWo would say, this deal was *"too sweeeeet!"*

Finally, Pak Watch debuted a new look and attitude as they covered upcoming titles such as 1080° Snowboarding and NBA In the Zone '98.

Taking the cover of the February issue was WCW vs. nWo: World Tour, with "Hollywood" Hulk Hogan putting "The Icon" Sting in a headlock – because anything less would be too civilized. Tagging with the New World Order's eight-page feature was Nagano Winter Olympics '98, Olympic Hockey Nagano '98, part one in a series of Yoshi's Story strategies, Mystical Ninja Starring Goemon, Magic Codes for Diddy Kong Racing on the back of a Wario Land II poster, a Fighter's Destiny move list, Cruis'n World, AeroGauge and FIFA '98: Road to the World Cup. Because when you're N64, you're N64 4 Life!

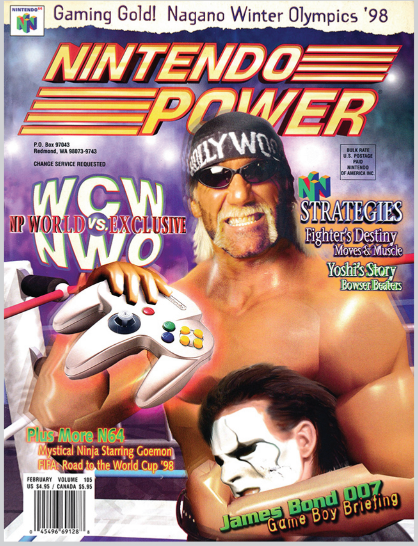
Meanwhile, for those limousine-ridin', jet-flyin', wheelin'-dealin' sons of guns on the road out there, international espionage was the order of the day, with James Bond 007 and Maui Mallard in Cold Shadow for Game Boy.

There were more participants in this month's Player's Poll than a 60-man World War 3 battle royal, but the winner who stood above all the rest won a trip to Paris as a VIP guest of Lamborghini Super Sport Rookie Trophy winner Ron Atapattu for 24 Hours of Le Mans action.

But to be the man, you've got to beat the man, and that's just what Iguana West and Acclaim set out to do with WWF War Zone, featured in Pak Watch alongside Wario Land II, Quake 64 and still more Zelda 64, plus the first wave of Nintendo 64 Player's Choice titles, including Super Mario 64, Star Wars: Shadows of the Empire, Turok: Dinosaur Hunter and more. Now can you dig *that*, suckaaaa?!
– DAVID

ISSUE #104: **JANUARY 1998**

ISSUE #105: **FEBRUARY 1998**



ORIGINAL RELEASE: GAME BOY, FEBRUARY 1997 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: PAX SOFTNICA

PLAYING IT TODAY

The shelf life on this article is not going to be too long, but if you're reading this before the 3DS eShop has closed its digital doors (sometime in March 2023), then you've still got a chance to buy the Virtual Console version of Mole Mania for just $2.99! If you missed that rock-bottom price, though, you've got two courses of action: seeking out a physical cartridge on an auction site like eBay or waiting to see what Nintendo does next with the Game Boy library. There were rumors that Game Boy games would be added to the Nintendo Switch Online lineup a while back, but so far they haven't come to fruition – we got N64 and Genesis games instead. If and when Game Boy does appear, though, I'm hopeful Mole Mania would be among its first additions!

HE'S A FAMILY MOLE

I'm sure there are plenty of people out there who think I'm crazy for having five kids. It's a lot! I'm fully aware! But I'm still two shy of good old Muddy Mole here. This Father of the Year has a total of seven children with his loving wife Maggie, and the impetus for his adventure is that all of them get mole-napped while he's away from home. An evil farmer named Jinbe is the culprit – he's angry at Muddy's whole mole clan for digging holes in his fields, I suppose? He spirits them all away to "Jinbe Land" and leaves one child apiece in the care of the big bosses lurking at the end of the game's seven huge puzzle-packed worlds. Muddy must clear every puzzle and pulverize every boss in order to save his kids one at a time, and then make it through a final boss rush to rescue Maggie and roll the end credits! It's a huge undertaking, but he's thankfully helped along by another family member: his own Dad, Grandpa Hint, who, true to his name, offers helpful hints when the puzzles start to get a little too tricky. Fathers helping fathers! This is Nintendo's most Dad-positive game ever!

(ABOUT TO BE)

TRAPPED IN THE PAST MOLE MANIA

Grab it before it goes back into Nintendo's vault . . . for who knows how long!

WELL, I SAID back on Page 14 that those eShop picks would be our final recommendations before the 3DS and Wii U digital stores close down in March, but I've got one more that I want to highlight here. To bring things truly full-circle to that first moment when three old Game Boy games were my first-ever downloads from the 3DS eShop, I want to suggest that all of you grab this Virtual Console game before it's gone.

Mole Mania has been praised as a hidden gem amongst the Nintendo fandom for so long at this point that I doubt it's all that hidden anymore, but it deserves every bit of extra recognition it can get. It was released in a time when Game Boy was almost fully faded out of the public consciousness – 1997, when the black-and-white handheld had been on the market for nearly eight years already, and the shot in the arm it got from the Super Game Boy had also lost its potency. Pokémon wouldn't truly revive the system until the following year, so Mole Mania was, unfortunately, buried right when it was released.

And what a shame that it wasn't celebrated from the start! Because this is as interesting and addictive of a puzzler as Nintendo has ever published. Shigeru Miyamoto himself was the mastermind behind its design, which inventively splits its single-screen stages into parallel-plane puzzles.

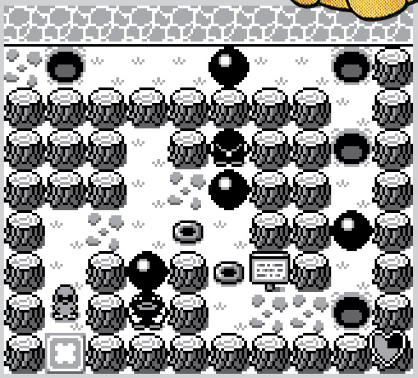
On the surface, our hero Muddy Mole must roll, throw or otherwise maneuver a large black ball to a goal door on every screen – it's the only thing large enough to smash through that barrier and open the way to the next stage. But the surface is packed full of obstacles and enemies, so Muddy must often make use of his natural ability as a mole to make further progress: He can burrow! At just about any point, Muddy can dig himself down into the underground, then tunnel around underneath all the traps that lie above. He can then emerge in a more advantageous position and carry on with the work of carrying that big black ball to the goal.

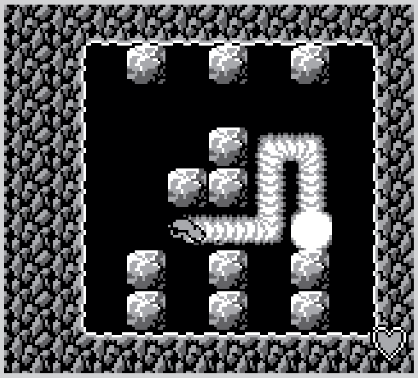
It's such a perfect gameplay concept! Early levels ease you into Muddy's methods of mole-ing around, then the puzzles get progressively more complicated as you dig deeper into the game. You go from simple single-screen solves that don't even require you to have to dig anywhere to complex messes of twisted passageways both above and below the earth – and even big boss battles, too!

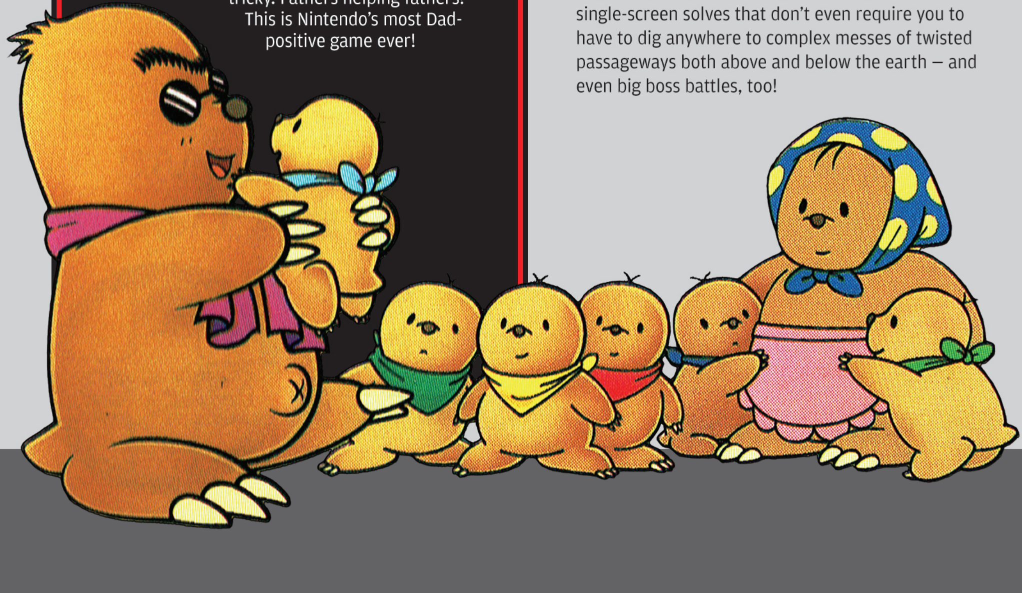
This is one of those puzzlers that is likely to fully stump you more than once, as you sit there staring at the screen wondering *how in the world* what you're looking at could possibly be solvable. But then it feels so fabulously rewarding when your brain finally works out the solution and you direct Muddy to execute on your hard-fought ideas!

Mole Mania is one of those one-off Nintendo releases that I would still love to see get a legacy sequel in the future. Though it seems like it missed its best window of opportunity – with gameplay that is split across two screens, Mole Mania 2 would have been a perfect fit for the DS era! But Nintendo does miss obvious opportunities like that all the time. (We got no Virtual Boy re-releases on 3DS, and Pokémon Snap's sequel missed the perfectly suited Wii U.) So I'll still hold on to a pinch of hope that Mr. Miyamoto may yet remember his mole.

For the moment, the original is still enough – especially since so few Nintendo fans have played it! So, do! Play it! My apologies to Super Mario Land, Alleyway and Radar Mission, but as the 3DS eShop era comes to an end, my final recommendation is for Mole Mania. **– LUCAS**







DATE & PLACE OF BIRTH
January 6, 1982 in Idaho (but I moved to Alaska when I was 3).

FAVORITE DRINK
Tea

LITTLE-KNOWN FACTS
I made a skateboarding game, but I can't actually skateboard. I've tried so many times. I've bought and repeatedly fallen off at least three skateboards!

I'm enough of a birder to roughly understand what birds are tweeting about at any given time, but it turns out most of it's lewd.

I used to deliver pizzas for a living, and I sort of miss it.

I once drove a five-ton (a military truck) across the entire U.S. We flew in, picked it up on the east coast, and now it's sitting in the moss out behind our house here on the west coast. It was EXCITING.

CURRENT POSITION IN THE INDUSTRY
Studio Founder

BEST KNOWN FOR
SkateBIRD, Hot Tin Roof

MEGAN FOX

The developer who dared to take on Tony Hawk with tiny hawks.

INTERVIEW BY JONATHAN HOLMES

KICKFLIP (OR KICKFLAP?) WITH SKATEBIRD'S NEW PHYSICAL RELEASE

Megan and her team at Glass Bottom Games first rolled their game about skateboarding birds into the Switch eShop in September 2021, and hopefully you've decided to download it at some point since then! But if not (or if you did and you'd like to double-dip), there's now a new physical edition of the game to consider adding to your tangible cartridge collection.

SkateBIRD's physical release should be available to order from the Limited Run Games store on Amazon.com by the time this issue wings its way into mailboxes around the world. (Note that the LRG Amazon store is a separate storefront than the one hosted on the LimitedRunGames.com website.) The cover art seen here is an Amazon exclusive, so that's where you've got to go to get it!

For our full review of SkateBIRD, check out NF Issue #56. And then also refer back to NF Issue #57, because that's where we awarded it the honor of Best Music in our 2021 Game of the Year Awards!

NF: What are some of the Nintendo games that inspired you to get into video game development?
MEGAN: I only had an NES, so Mario 3 and Zelda 2 were the big ones, but beyond Nintendo it was PC games like Ultima 7. That was the first big open-world sandbox game I'd ever seen, and everyone had daily schedules and went to bed and ate in the pubs and etc., and it basically blew my kid brain. That's what made me want to make games – that sense of a whole other world running by its own logics and rules.

What was the first game you ever worked on, and what was it like?
It was a terrible newbie attempt at making a Dragon Warrior 1 clone, and I didn't get past making a smooth scrolling tile engine and entering/exiting towns. But it did those things and was cool! Wrote it from bare metal in C.

You were a programmer on LEGO Universe, a game that was like Roblox except much more stable and consistent, not to mention it had the LEGO branding going for it. And yet Roblox went on to make more and more every year, culminating in 2022 when it made over $2,000,000,000. In the end, LEGO Universe didn't do quite as well. Why do you think one did so much better than the other?
LEGO Universe didn't succeed because LEGO, thankfully, has morals – or at least they care about their image. They weren't willing to go truly F2P and squeeze the kids for money. Roblox had no such compunctions. I'm glad I worked on the fun game that people remember fondly, instead of the one that's giving pre-teens PTSD.

You've been designing, making and marketing games on your own for 10 years! What's the secret to longevity in the video game industry?
Lots and lots and lots of fallback plans, ways of surviving, places I can lower my living standards even further, etc. I crashed through a TON of those in the first four years. Been climbing back up ever since.

A lot about making indie games has changed since 2013. What have been some of the best and worst industry transformations and mutations you've lived through so far?
The best was seeing the tail end of the indie golden years, 2010 or so probably, but personally missing the height of them definitely sucked. Though the rise of Game Pass and other funding models created a new wave, and hey, we *[Megan's studio, Glass Bottom Games]* were actually positioned once to catch it a bit!

SkateBIRD, your latest game, is also your biggest hit. Why do you think it's done so well?
Part of it's just spending a decade *bleep*-ing up. (We got better.)
The other part is finally making a game in a genre I loved, instead of trying to triangulate in on a "Hot-Genre-With-A-Twist-But-With-Stuff-I-Like-In-It-Too" design concept.

Your game also features a cameo from a Crewmate from Among Us. That's another game that's raked in a lot of dough. Why do you think it is that every couple of years, a game with minimal conventional marketing that was developed outside of the AAA system goes on to pull in more proportional profit than most modern AAA releases?
Sheer luck. They were a good game in the right place, right time.

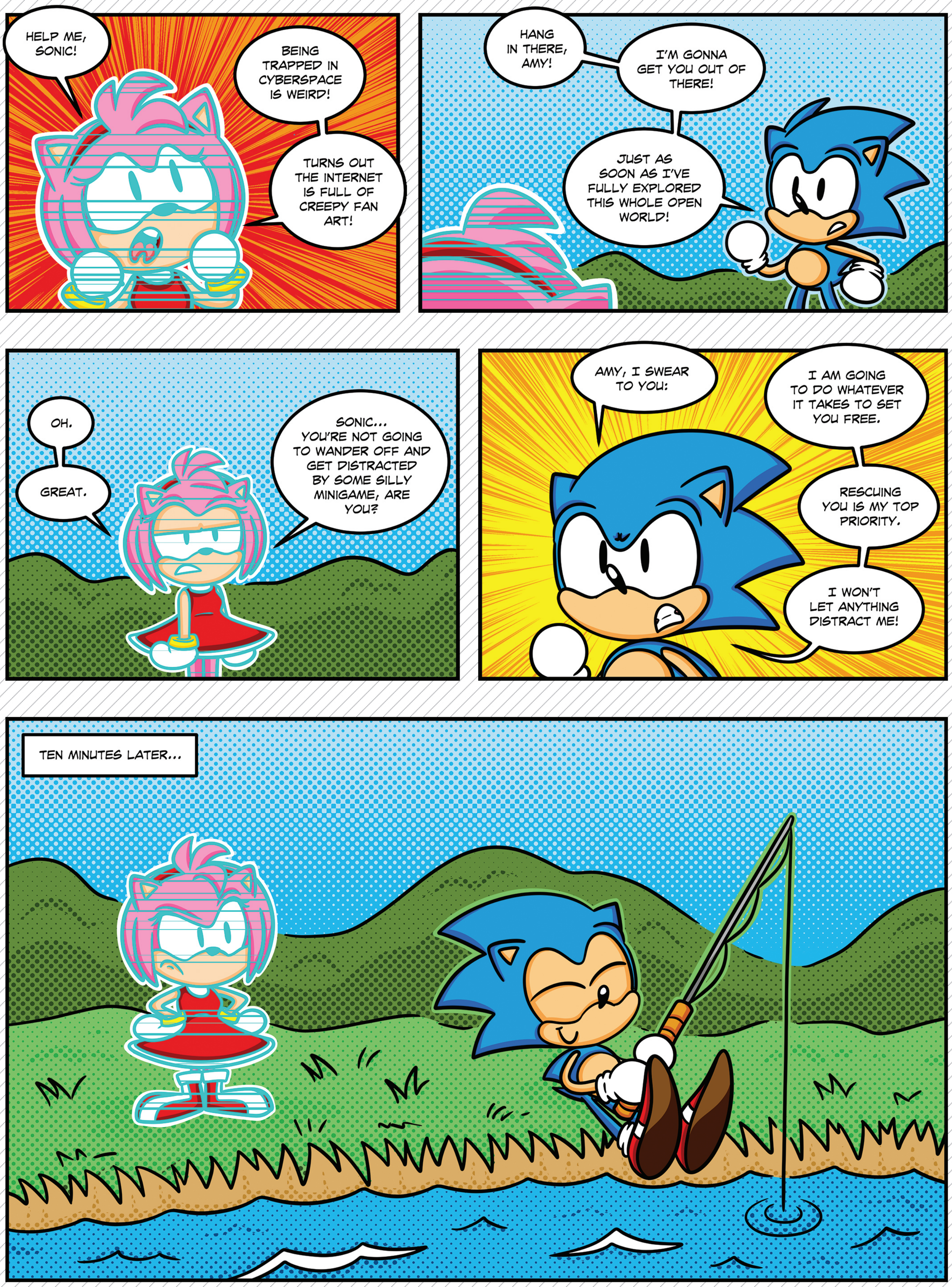
You were recently awarded (or is it crowned?) a breakthrough award from BAFTA, the British Academy of Film and Television Arts. How did that happen? What do you think it all means?
It was a surprise to me, I still have no idea who nominated me, and honestly no idea? It's some fancy letters after my name that might mean some people in power notice me more, which gives me a tiny edge, I hope? That kinda thing.

Do you have any advice for aspiring game developers?
Don't go full-time until your part-time work is really starting to make money, get fan response, you've got an audience, something. Either that, or have a plan where you can survive for one to five years without your games making money.

We know your next project is a secret, but we also know that you're extremely excited about it. Is there anything that your excited side can tell us about the game before your responsible side swears it to secrecy?
It's about a bird who runs the impossibly huge mailroom in the mind of a teenager.

Sticking with birds in the lead role, I see! Thanks for letting us know that! OK, if you could make a game using any of Nintendo's characters, and you had an unlimited budget and creative freedom, which character would you choose and what would you make?
Kirby. Kirby is the GOAT. No clue what I'd make with him though – probably some chill open world thing, like if Breath of the Wild was more about finding nice places to have picnics and build little cute towns for the Waddle Dees.

Finally, if you could have any super-power, what would it be and why?
Shape changing, which I would use to become a sofa and hide from anyone asking the "What Super Power" question. *(laughs)* NF



BY MATTHEW LOFFHAGEN

The chaotic crossover continues! Read our full review of the all-new Mario + Rabbids adventure!

SWITCH PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: UBISOFT MILAN
RATING: E10+

A Total Tactical Overhaul

MARIO + RABBIDS SPARKS OF HOPE

RABBID ROSALINA IS relatable.

After all, if you lived in a cozy castle filled with books in the middle of a kingdom eternally blanketed by snow, wouldn't you just want to spend every day lazing around by the fireplace, staying nice and comfy and warm? That's Rabbid Rosalina's best life. And yet, when adventure calls, she still picks herself up and heads out the door. Some things are worth not being lazy for.

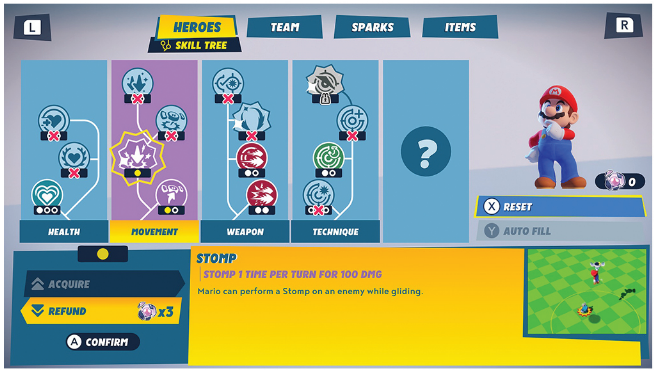
That's Mario + Rabbids Sparks of Hope to me. The developers who gave us the original Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle in 2017 and then its Donkey Kong DLC campaign one year later could have very easily kicked back, rested on their laurels and put themselves on auto-pilot to deliver similarly structured sequels for the rest of the Switch life cycle – and beyond! And yet they rejected the chance to take such an easy path. This sequel pitches a ton of the templates crafted to create those first two campaigns in the trash, and intentionally starts over from scratch to give us a whole new vision of what "Mario in the turn-based strategy genre" can look like.

The biggest change, as we said in several previews, is that the grid is gone. Battlefields in Kingdom Battle were all built out of square spaces, so each hero and enemy always had one defined spot where they'd end up standing at the end of a turn – that must have been a little easier for the combat designers to manage. But now the old design restrictions have flown out the window, so arenas can have curves and gradual elevation changes and bits of cover to hide behind that aren't always placed at a perfect 90-degree angle relative to every other piece of geometry on the map. Your heroes and your enemies, too, are not locked into specific spots with their movements – you're free to tweak your position bit by bit in any direction you like in order to gain line-of-sight on a foe that *thought* they were hiding and blast them out of existence!

I like the new method of movement for the most part, as each hero gets a maximum distance projected on the ground when they begin their turn and they can freely run around to any spot within that space – or they can leap off the back of an ally who's standing within that same space in order to hop into the air and grab the hovering helper character Beep-0, who turns into a helicopter temporarily to carry his passenger to another spot a little further away. But it does get a bit odd when you're trying to cover as much ground as possible, since each hero can only Team Jump once, so you end up playing leapfrog with one hopping on the other to fly a short way forward – and then the two trading roles so the launcher can then become the flier too.

Proximity to enemies is another consideration in the combat, as some characters have short-range weapons and need to move in close, while others need to keep their distance. Luigi brought me the most joy here – his long-range sniping bow in this sequel deals more damage the further away he stands from his target, and it has a massive range, so you can pull off some truly satisfying shots where he fires from a mile away on the other side of the map, threading the needle through all the obstacles in the middle and hitting his mark for devastating damage. It's amazing! It really makes you feel like a tactical mastermind when everything lines up just right.

One shift in this sequel that I didn't care for is the fact that getting new weapons is no longer a thing. Kingdom Battle regularly had you upgrading the heroes' armaments, which offered a sense of progression and empowerment as they made it further through the story. In Sparks of Hope, all "new" weapons are just cosmetic skins that have no effect on their damage output or other abilities. What's worse, if you do choose to still buy and equip these new skins, they don't show up in the cool posing cutscenes. Those always use just the base models.



With buying new weapons kicked to the curb, the heroes' growth now lives entirely on the Skill Tree screen. You earn Skill Prisms for clearing battles, then can spend them on the Tree to do things like boost a hero's number of hit points, add to the damage their main weapon does or enhance the range of their special techniques. It's all totally flexible and non-commital, too, so if you decide later on that you're unhappy with your hero's build, you can refund the Prisms you spent previously and redistribute them elsewhere with no penalty. That's nice.

If you're still hankering for the power to "equip" something, though, that's where the Sparks come in. The titular stars of this sequel, the Sparks are Rabbid/Luma hybrids who each pack some kind of special punch when used in battle – they might power up your heroes' main weapons, add an extra effect to their dash attacks, cause them to turn invisible to avoid detection from enemies or even rain down fire from the heavens to set your foes ablaze. Every hero can ultimately equip two of the Sparks at once, and creating just the right set for everyone is key!

I guess a lot of strategy games are like that – having battles basically be won or lost before they even begin, due to the decisions made to set up the heroes on menu screens ahead of time. Ultimately having all of the Skill Tree options and Spark choices kind of hurt the fun factor a bit for me, since I was able to put together a combination of abilities that was literally unbeatable for the A.I. I had battles by the end in which Mario automatically blasted and eliminated 50 bad guys or more, without the other heroes having to do anything, or even move! Rabbid Rosalina could have just stayed in bed after all!

That was only at the tail end of the campaign, though. Sparks of Hope is not a total cakewalk all the way through, so don't worry about being bored by any lack of difficulty. In fact, if you find it too easy at any point, that same Skill Tree screen is a simple challenge level adjuster – just don't spend all the Prisms available to you and you could give the enemies more of a fighting chance!

Beyond the battlefields, Sparks of Hope is full of box-pushing puzzles, silly bits of story (oddly conveyed by dialogue that is voice acted only half of the time) and gorgeous environments to explore.

The "Mario X Rabbids crossing over" theme is not as prominent this time, so it's not quite as whimsical as before – but the new heroes, especially my favorite, Rabbid Rosalina – are all a ton of fun to play. If you played and enjoyed Kingdom Battle, you'll surely love setting off into outer space in this sequel. And if you never played that one, this one is so different that you could feel free to just start here! It stands alone in a way that "Kingdom Battle 2" might not have. **– LUCAS**

9.0

The Cartoon Kart Racer's Best Effort Yet

NICKELODEON KART RACERS 3: SLIME SPEEDWAY

NICKELODEON SEEMS RATHER intent on catching up to Mario Kart in its number of entries, as it's released three in this generation alone. But while they had quite a way to go in order to catch up (and still do), they might be able to ease up off the gas a little after this release, which seems to have nicely honed some of the issues I've had with the previous entries.

In fact, that's precisely why I felt so inclined to take on this review: After going through the previous two titles and finding enjoyable experiences with room for improvement, I figured I owed it to them to give this one a go after its announcement trailer showed they were doing just that. And after playing it, I think the game is finally tapping into the kind of potential the license provides!

My biggest grievance from the word "go" with this series has been its lack of voices. Voices make up a lot of these characters, especially when you're spending most of your time seeing them from the back. Now, at long last, the characters are all voiced! And the game wastes no time showing it off, as you're immediately thrown into a tutorial with SpongeBob once again training to get his driver's license, while his friends (and Squidward) give him all sorts of tips to help him succeed.

The voices also help enhance the gameplay as you perform tricks and use items, to say nothing of the victory celebrations and menus. It just *feels* right.

Another issue I had previously was that the vehicles being driven seemed to leave a lot of the source material on the table. For instance, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles have had numerous wild and cool rides over the years, but they didn't seem to be represented in-game. Now, while I can't account for every vehicle against every show represented here, I can at least say that if you want a Ninja Turtle to drive the Turtle Van, or April O'Neil to drive her Channel 6 News van, those are now options. In fact, they're options for anyone, as this installment lets you match any driver with any vehicle, and you can further customize each ride to your liking and skills.

Speaking of the Turtles, I'd be remiss in not pointing out that while the last two iterations featured the versions from the long-ended (but quite excellent) 2012 show, the classic '87 TMNT (and April) are continuing their comeback tour as part of this new roster. Plus, I threw out the idea last time that since Nick acquired Garfield, maybe he could show up – and both he and Odie are in! Along with some new additions and a few removals (I'm seriously surprised we have Rugrats with no Tommy or Angelica here).

If there's one small nitpick, though, it's that a lot of the characters and karts, including many of the ones I mentioned, are locked away when you start up the game. Some are unlocked from performing certain tasks, while a good number have to be paid for with the in-game Slime Token currency, and that can take a while. Suffice to say, if you're planning a Nickelodeon Kart Racers 3 party with your friends, you might have some work to put in first.

In some ways, this feels like Game Mill has filled in some longstanding gaps. Unless you have a particular attachment to some of the removed characters, then this is the version to get when you see it for sale alongside its price-reduced predecessors. It's not an *outstanding* example of the genre and can chug a little when things get hectic, but certainly a more than competent one that is bolstered if you have a love for Nickelodeon, or even just some of the properties represented.

Now, having achieved this level of success, will this series hit the brakes? Or will we see a Kart Racers 4 before long? **– DAVID**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: GAME MILL
DEVELOPER: BAMTANG GAMES
RATING: E

6.5

Minigames from the Sea

ACE ANGLER: FISHING SPIRITS

I'VE PLAYED A few fishing simulators on 3DS and Switch, and I hoped that Ace Angler: Fishing Spirits would be like the rest. Instead, it's a fishing-themed minigame collection, based on the Bandai Namco-developed Fishing Spirits arcade game franchise, and the best way I can describe it is as a fishing shonen anime. While it's got a lot of fun activities and has some educational value, it has major drawbacks.

The first major drawback: While all the text has been translated into English, all the audio remains in Japanese. In some gaming modes, it's not so bad, but in others, dubbing the incidental dialogue would've enhanced the experience. One example: Shark Fever, which is a virtual version of coin pusher arcade games, has a narrator announce major wins on the roulette and other "pump you up" dialogue – completely in Japanese. I understand what he's saying, but the target audience of this game more than likely won't, and if you're unable to read the on-screen text, you'll be completely lost.

The second: It's assumed that as soon as you put the controller in your hands, you know what you're doing. There's no tutorial, except for a few screens of tips during loading sequences – it took me a few failed rounds to realize that I can use the A Button to reel in my catch, along with using the shoulder buttons to send stunning electric shocks to weaken the fish you're catching (it makes sense in context). There are several different control methods, and I found myself using the double Joy-Con controls with the Grip the most often (the Pro Controller is not supported). There are not only single Joy-Con controls, but also double Joy-Con motion controls, and I found a fishing pole peripheral at Five Below for less than $3 that uses one Joy-Con plugged into the handle and the other plugged into a reel. It's not too hard to find and it really adds to the experience, even though it tired my hands out too fast.

After creating your character (which looks like it came right out of Animal Crossing), you are sent to the main hub, Marine Medal Mania, which has the Ace Angler Aquarium as its centerpiece. By participating in minigames, quizzes and the story mode, you win medals and tickets. Tickets are used for the aquarium's gacha, while medals can be used for the games, gacha draws or to purchase new cosmetics. And what is this gacha? Instead of going out and catching fish for the aquarium, you must draw them from a gacha machine with the tickets and medals you win! There's a variety of new environments that unlock as you collect more and more stamps on your card, and a lot of the fish you draw are more on the fantastic side – golden fish that look like they're celebrating Mardi Gras, or the boss monsters you catch during the story level. (Also, for some reason, penguins.)

Legend of the Poisoned Seas is the story mode, where you travel with seafaring twins Nagisa and Minato to different bodies of water to investigate monstrous evil fish that are spreading corruption. The online tournament mode has you competing head-to-head with other players in various contests. Ace Angler+ is a home version of the Fishing Spirits arcade game, where you'll need to use medals to catch more fish, as well as unlock new tables (including a Taiko no Tatsujin-themed level!) and rods.

Speaking of crossovers, Ace Angler Party's minigame collection features a few rather weird ones: collaborations with Japanese restaurant chains Sushiro and Gindaco (the same Gindaco that appears in the Yakuza games), Ottotto snack crackers (think Japan's answer to Pepperidge Farm's Goldfish) and the picture book series Encyclopedia of Unfortunate Creatures. The Unfortunate Creatures challenge is the best of the bunch, since it doesn't involve blatant advertising.

This is a fun and challenging little collection, but the fact there's no English dubbing really holds me back from giving it a higher score, and the inclusion of the virtual coin pusher also gives me pause. It's probably better to play this with older kids who don't mind hearing Japanese dialogue.
– REBECCA

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: BANDAI NAMCO RATING: T

Which Witch is Which?

BAYONETTA 3

A BAYONET IS a knife combined with a gun. Ironically enough, knives are one of the few weapons you won't see much of in the Bayonetta series, but the name is still a perfect fit, because this lady is positively stacked with firepower! With her signature gun shoes, mastery of multiple martial arts and ability to use her hair to summon giant demons to do her bidding, this war-torn witch is the ultimate definition of a femme fatale.

But her games have never sold that great! She's one of gaming's most well-known women, but not because people actually take the step to buy her titles. Bayonetta 3 looks to change that by ditching some aspects of the series that may have turned people off in the past, while turning the unique fun factor of the franchise up to 11. It's by far the biggest, boldest Bayonetta game yet, with more fantastic magic and massive monsters than ever!

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: PLATINUMGAMES
RATING: M

By the end of the adventure, Bayo can transform into over 10 totally different "woman/demon" hybrids. And for every transformation she has, there's a coinciding enormous creature she can summon to do her bidding. Even better, you can control both the kaiju and Bayo at the same time. And somehow, it's not even confusing! Well, most of the time anyway. There were a few moments when there was so much going on at once that I lost sight of little Bayo in all the action, but that was rare.

There's also a whole new playable character named Viola, who's much harder to master than Bayo. And for even more variety, in every fourth level or so you play as Jeanne, Bayo's longtime gal pal, who runs through her own separate 2D spy thriller sections that are like a cross between arcade classic Elevator Action and Metal Gear Solid. And there's also two unlockable minigames that introduce totally new art styles. The list goes on!

In order to accommodate those added factors to keep in your head, a couple of the more complex aspects of Bayonetta 1 and 2 were shaved off for this third title. For example, you can no longer equip your arms and legs with separate sets of weapons. The way to gain new abilities has also been streamlined, with a lot less need for grinding for money. Instead, you can now choose your new moves from a skill tree that's attached to each weapon and summonable demon. You also don't need to buy as much from the store – weapons, transformations and giant monsters are all acquired through story beats, and there's no shortage of them. The game is absolutely stuffed with lush locales, narrative "wow" moments and new powers to pick up.

It's also the perfect starting point for people just getting into Bayo now. Don't let that 3 at the end of the title fool you! The tale of Bayonetta 1 and 2 is pretty self-contained, while this new game goes in whole new directions. Some of the signature angels and demons from past titles show up here and there, but for the most part, Bayonetta 3 is a standalone romp about traveling across the Earth and through the Multiverse, fighting scientific horrors called the Homunculi. Bayo meets so many alternate versions of herself and her friends that you'll barely get a chance to think about anything that happened before, and if the sacrilegious aspects of prior games were a turn-off, Bayonetta 3 was made for you.

You can now also literally turn off some of the more potentially unsettling or unsavory aspects of the game. By activating the Naive Angel mode, cigars become sticks of chocolate, gore is cut down and Bayonetta keeps her clothes on throughout. With a game this packed with inappropriateness, it takes a lot to try to make it less potentially offensive, but the effort is appreciated. I laughed out loud when a key character ripped a tomato out her chest instead of her own heart like she did in the regular story.

A lot more than that has been done to make Bayonetta 3 a hit with fans of other Nintendo franchises. You could say that if Bayonetta 1 and 2 are the Mario Galaxy 1 and 2 of character action games, then Bayonetta 3 is the Mario Odyssey. There are so many ways to traverse the often large, unlockable-packed environments!

Turn into a spider-woman to climb straight up a wall, then transform into a ghost train to dash across the sky. Or become a demon puppet and pull your own strings across a vast chasm! It's all part of the thrill of being the world's best witch.

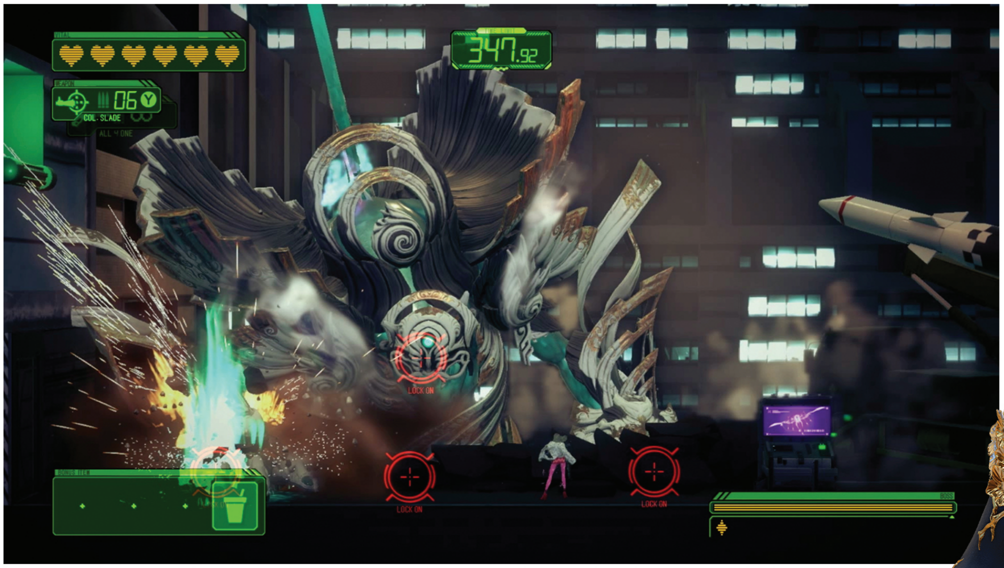
That brings me to my only real problem with Bayonetta 3: It can't keep up with itself. Most of the monster forms are a ton of fun, but a few pale in comparison. There's a fish-woman transformation that I used for all of five minutes before totally forgetting about it. That's the general vibe of the last fifth or so of the game: It feels like being pushed into an all-you-can-eat buffet while you've already got your mouth full of your favorite foods.

It's also worth mentioning that while the story manages to pack more Bayonettas into one game than we ever could have hoped for, not everyone will be impressed with how the tale turns out. While the ending promises that this is not the last we'll see of this series, it definitely feels like a swan song for Bayo and her crew as we knew them.

That's OK though. While it's less consistently fantastic than Bayonetta 2, there's probably three times as much game here, and it's all more over-the-top than ever. It'll keep fans happy for a long time.

And even if the main series goes on a long hiatus, the Bayo brand is confirmed to already be continuing soon through the spin-off Bayonetta Origins – we'll take a look at that one in our next issue! **— JONATHAN**

9.0



A Time to Sow, A Time to Reap

HARVESTELLA

TOWARD THE END of 2022, Square Enix loaded a bunch of games into a tub, opened the door with its hip and threw those games out into its yard. Us RPG fans ran after these RPGs like so many chickens trying to eat scattered corn.

Unsurprisingly, it was impossible to pick up everything Square Enix dished out. A lot of good, interesting games are going to slip through the cracks as a consequence, meaning it's probably Harvestella's fate to be forgotten. And that's a darn shame, because this is exactly the kind of weird experiment that farming sim RPGs need more of.

Sometimes Harvestella doesn't click exactly the way it should – something about the economy driving the game feels odd, and buying items/selling crops doesn't pay off as neatly as it does in Stardew Valley or Rune Factory – but its world is fascinating, and its hack-and-slash combat is satisfying.

The seasons in Harvestella are shepherded by "Seaslights," giant crystals that represent winter, spring, summer and fall. You're gifted a little farm early in the game that's touched by the light of all four, meaning you get to experience all four seasons.

Harvestella's farming mechanics echo the mechanics of other games in its genre. Till the ground, plant the seeds, water the crops. Buy the chickens, buy the cows. Reap the bounty of the earth and sell it to afford upgrades to your farm.

I always enjoy meeting the new day when I play a farming game (because Lord knows I'm not one to purposefully be awake for a sunrise), and the same is true for Harvestella. Collecting crops that I planted feels nice, as does feeding my animals. But when you ship your produce and you see how much you earned, you realize "Dang, these numbers don't add up the way they do in Stardew Valley."

That might be on purpose. While Harvestella does let you upgrade your farm, money plays a limited role in its expansion. Much of your growth comes from completing tasks doled out by four guardian faeries. The game doesn't necessarily want you to farm for money; it wants you to farm for ingredients that let you prepare powerful buffing and debuffing dishes.

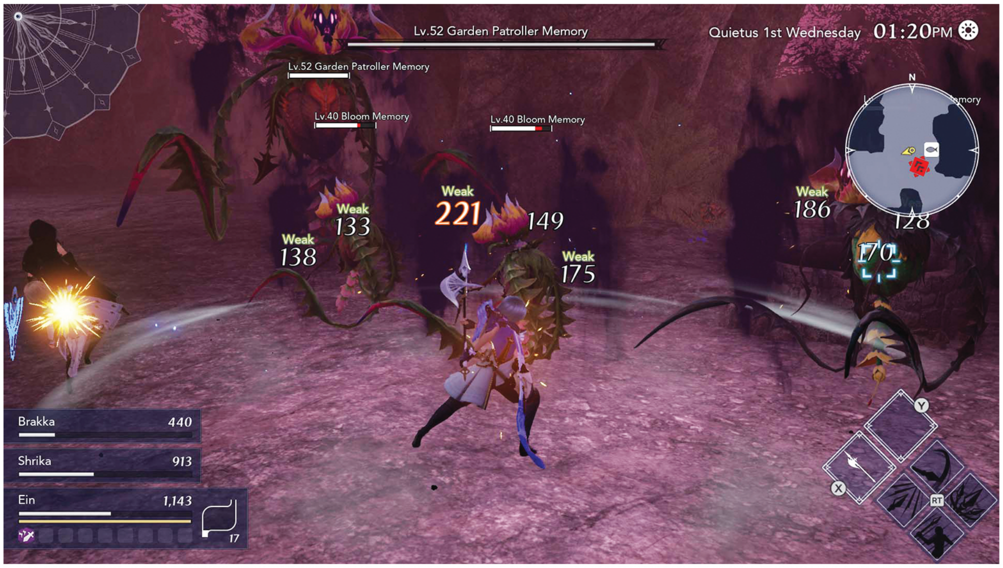
That's because there's a good deal of combat in Harvestella. It's fun and frantic, but not very deep. You take on large dungeons that require several in-game days to complete, and the maps are filled with midboss-class monsters called FEARs. You meet an array of companions who fight alongside you, and there are several jobs to try out.

So you don't farm for the sake of farming in Harvestella. You farm to supply yourself for your adventures. It feels kind of awesome to be a self-made hero! Still, this is not Stardew Valley with pretty Square Enix characters, and that might disappoint people.

It's worth approaching Harvestella with an open mind. Square Enix has invented a world that's as eerie and unsettling as it is beautiful. Quietus, the season of Death that comes at the end of every normal month, turns the landscape ashen-grey while black-and-red spores drift in the air. Unicorns dwell in crystal forests and strangers in mech suits stride through the wilds. There's a definite whiff of Monolith Soft's Xeno series in Harvestella. That's OK! Just keep smashing mechs, theology and the forces of nature into RPGs! You can't lose.

Harvestella is exactly the kind of game that would theoretically get everything right in a sequel. Its mix of action and farming isn't what every sim fan wants, its combat is hacky and it was clearly made on a budget. But its seeds have now been sown, and I hope they get a chance to flourish.

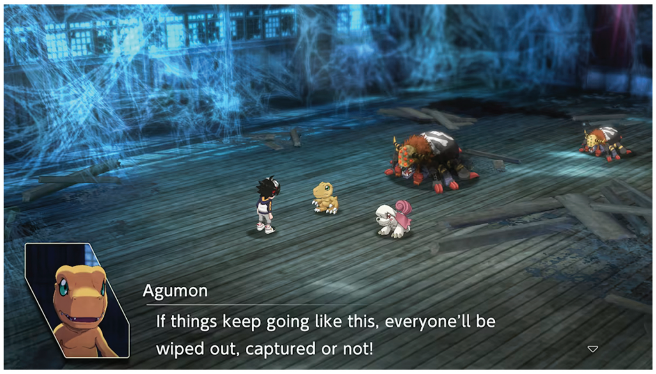
– NADIA



8.0

SWITCH

PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX
DEVELOPER: LIVE WIRE
RATING: T



Are Digimon Still the Champions?

DIGIMON SURVIVE

WHENEVER I THINK of Digimon, I'm reminded of the anime I used to watch on Saturday mornings with some sugary cereal. Digimon Survive, the franchise's latest video game entry, captures that nostalgia and combines it with the tense atmosphere you'd find in a horror movie.

It's a strange combination, but it works because much of the Digimon fandom like myself are adults now. The concept of being spirited away to a new world where you encounter strange monsters feels scarier as an adult. You tend to think about the possible dangers and what can go wrong.

And boy, does Digimon Survive explore what all can go wrong in its narrative.

The story, which plays out like a visual novel, starts out with a group of middle schoolers on a school trip in the countryside. While exploring, they are transported to a different world that looks similar to their own and inhabited by monsters called Kemonogami (a.k.a. what we know as Digimon).

The students end up in bonded pairs with the monsters and set out on a journey to return to their world, but the way back quickly takes a dark turn. They encounter mysterious fog and violent creatures. They hear rumors of child sacrifices, and they start to fight among themselves.

Digimon Survive never sugarcoats that these are middle schoolers who have to fend for themselves and the trauma that causes. One character, Ryo, completely shuts down mentally; while another, Shuuji, harshly takes out his anger on his partner Lopmon. These scenes were hard to watch, but I appreciated the game's commitment to its mature story.

You have agency in this narrative via the visual novel gameplay. You can explore the environment by examining areas, raise affinity with characters and make choices to determine which route the story takes.

In the first playthrough, you have three routes, and a second playthrough offers a fourth option. I'm not a huge fan of this game design, where you have to complete a second playthrough to have access to all choices, especially when one playthrough can take 40 hours.

Digimon Survive also features tactical combat, where Digimon face off on grid-based battlefields. The system provides a nice break from the visual novel portions. It's simplistic and fun.

It features basic and special attacks and Digivolution, where your Digimon transform into stronger monsters. Staying near your team members provides buffs, and you can flank enemies and use back and side attacks to deal more damage.

At first, your team is composed of only Digimon that have bonded with the cast, but you can recruit new monsters by convincing them to join your team with dialogue choices.

I enjoyed adding Digimon to my team, but it didn't feel super necessary. You're often required to use certain Digimon in the battles to progress the main story. Most of the Digimon I recruited ended up on the bench.

Digimon Survive performs well in TV and Handheld Mode. I encountered one recurring issue that took me out of the experience: In several instances, the wrong pronouns were used in dialogue when referring to characters, and it caused confusion in those scenes.

With its mature themes, Digimon Survive provides a refreshing take on the franchise and fits into the series' canon in a really cool way. I hope we get more Digimon games exploring new directions like this! **— MAGGIE**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: BANDAI NAMCO RATING: T

SWITCH PUBLISHERS: NINTENDO & THE POKÉMON COMPANY
DEVELOPER: GAME FREAK RATING: E

What? Pokémon is Evolving!
POKÉMON SCARLET & VIOLET

PALDEA ISN'T PERFECT.

We had a lot of advance warning that Pokémon Scarlet & Violet were going to be plagued by technical problems. Pre-release trailers shared in the months leading up to their launch were full of choppy framerates and low-detail environments, so we braced for the worst.

Then, when the final games got into players' hands, the online discourse surrounding them centered entirely on disastrous rendering errors, laughably bad textures and glitches galore. "How did Nintendo allow this to be released in this state?" was a common question – and one I can't rightly argue against. This new Paldea region has problems.

. . . And I really don't care!

Honestly, seeing such a major game from Nintendo be sent out for public consumption in such a bug-riddled state is notable, and I'm sure plenty of high-volume conversations, accusations and full-force table flippings have happened behind the scenes both at Nintendo and Game Freak as a result. I'm hopeful we don't ever get another game as technically pitiful as this from Pokémon or any other series in the future. But the hyperbole built up around this one aspect of Scarlet & Violet got way too intense, and I won't be adding any more to it here. The games needed more development time, they should be patched, etc. But even in their Day 1 state, they were still a total blast to play.

Here in the Thomas home, the latest Pokémon journey was once again experienced three times over, with Carter, Calvin and myself each picking different starters and setting out on our own paths through Paldea. But this time around, that really meant something! With some past games in this series, Carter would sit and play through an hour of the story, and then it would be Calvin's turn, and he would sit and play through the exact same hour of the exact same story. No player's game could ever be all that different from another's. But in Scarlet & Violet, the new open-world region design meant that all of us really could go in different directions and experience different things!

After early hours of exploration in different parts of the map let each of us build up unique teams of totally different monsters, we then began to prioritize different adventures: Carter focused his efforts on taking down the Team Star strongholds, Calvin tackled the Titan battles and I kept things mostly traditional by going for Gym Badges and ultimately aiming to take on the Elite 4. But even within those journeys, there's freedom to blaze your own trail. There's no Gym that has to be the first one you challenge. Team Star's bases can be attacked in any order. The Titans can be found and fought in whatever sequence you choose too!

. . . To a certain extent. I feared this might be the case, and sure enough the developers didn't go far enough in facilitating this freedom: There's no level scaling in place here. So while you can make the choice to climb up the snow-covered Glaseado Mountain and challenge the Ice-type Gym there in the first hour or so of the game, you'll still be met with a crushing team of Level 40-something opponents if you do. It would have been so much cooler if the game had adjusted to players' chosen paths instead! Let me take on the Ice Gym first, and have the Leader there use Level 10 monsters if that happens. The "intended" low-level Bug Gym? Have that Leader go all-out with a super team of incredible insects if I stroll through the door with seven Badges already in my possession!

Alas. Maybe next time.

That oversight (and all the glitches) may be my only complaints about this new adventure, though. Everything else I've got to say about Scarlet & Violet is a list of things these sequels absolutely got right – things fully worthy of praise. So let's get to 'em!

First up, the new Pokémon in this new Pokémon region are incredible! Over and over again while playing I was taken aback at their winning designs – and their real-world inspirations. It's like Game Freak knew they were heading toward the big #1000 mark in the series' global Pokédex, so they finally got tons of longtime wishlist monsters made to get them in under the wire!

There's finally a flamingo Pokémon. A dolphin Pokémon. An earthworm and a dung beetle and an ostrich! All of these different animals that should have inspired Pokémon years ago finally have, and I loved stumbling across each one in the wild.

What's more, this fresh set of 'mons also checked off several more of the series' unused type combinations, so we finally have a Steel/Poison-type, an Electric/Fighting-type and the long-sought Grass/Fire. The Pokémon themselves are always the stars of the show in each new Pokémon game, and it's encouraging that over 25 years into the life of the series, the creature crafters are still finding creative new creations.

Scarlet & Violet are also winners on the other side of the character design coin too: The humans of Paldea are some of the best the series has ever seen! The story-driving NPCs have real depth in their motivations (except for Nemona, perhaps, who's a one-note "I just love to battle!" force of nature). The central school is full of unique teachers that 95% of players will likely ignore entirely. The Gym Leaders and Elite 4 members are varied individuals often with their own jobs and lives, so they're not just stoically standing at attention inside a trap-filled building 24/7 waiting for 10-year-olds to stop by and fight them.

And the best has to be Larry. Just look at how beautifully unremarkable he is! A bland, boring businessman serving as the representative of the "Normal" type is spot-on perfection.

The praise continues! I also loved exploring Paldea. Yes, it's not the most visually spectacular setting we've seen on the Switch, and you'll come across plenty of muddily textured rock faces on your journey that can be distracting – but taken as a whole, I genuinely enjoyed traveling around this latest Pokémon world.

My favorite aspect of exploration is that Game Freak built Paldea in such a way that player discovery is prioritized – not everything is explained. There are some things you just stumble upon as you roam. Key story-progressing points of interest get marked on your map to give you a general sense of where to go, but everywhere else is yours to see at your own pace. I think that's awesome.

The best part was the hunt for the "ominous black stakes." Legendary Pokémon exist in Paldea, but they're not a part of the core story, so it's not like past games where you progress through the plot and are forced at one point to come face-to-face with, say, Kyogre, and you clearly have just that one opportunity to catch it. Rather, the Legendaries here are hiding behind these big, foreboding circular doors scattered across the landscape, each one covered in chains. When you find one, you're not told how to open it – or even that there is a Pokémon in there at all. You have to come to those realizations yourself.

Ultimately you find out that each door's chains are connected to black stakes sprinkled in hard-to-reach places around the map – pulling them all out of the ground will open the door and give you a chance to catch the Pokémon inside. But finding them all is tricky! You really have to put in an honest effort of exploration, and it's great that players who do invest that time in fully investigating all the nooks and crannies of Paldea get rewarded with great new Legendaries.

Lastly, let me offer my admiration for the core story and its conclusion. You do get to choose which of the three separate adventures to focus on at first, but in the end you'll finish them all – and when you do you get a final fourth scenario that sends you into Paldea's previously inaccessible Great Crater. What happens there is some peak endgame JRPG stuff that honestly takes Pokémon up a notch in terms of interest and intensity! But I don't want to say anything more for fear of spoiling things!

In the end, Pokémon Scarlet & Violet definitely suffer from underdone development, and I hope the final behind-the-scenes reaction at Nintendo and Game Freak is to give the series' dev team more time to work on future sequels. We don't need new generations so often! But the adventure of these games, the wonderful new set of Pokémon, the winning cast of human characters and a sensational story all work to save the experience and make them worth playing and enjoying, warts and all.
– LUCAS

8.5

Can You Become a Drum Master?

TAIKO NO TATSUJIN: RHYTHM FESTIVAL

TAIKO NO TATSUJIN has struggled for years to find a foothold outside Japan. After finally landing repeated success with surprise international releases from 2018 onward across all modern platforms, Namco is now taking an even bigger chance on global shores with the latest in the series, Rhythm Festival.

At its core, Rhythm Festival is the same rhythm game experience many have come to love across Taiko's history – a fairly traditional musical experience where players are tasked with bashing the center and rims of the drum to simulate playing the traditional Japanese percussion instrument. If you haven't invested in the tiny plastic replica drum, don't even fret – Taiko can still be thoroughly enjoyed using a number of surprisingly effective control options, including touch controls, motion controls and classic face buttons. Take your pick.

Where Rhythm Festival changes its tune is with the introduction of a monthly Music Pass subscription to add DLC songs to the game. If you've played the Taiko game available via Apple Arcade, this is basically the same experience, now on a home console for the first time. For $3.99 a month or $9.99 for three, players get access to literally hundreds of songs, with the setlist updated regularly since launch.

This subscription helps to give the game an extended life without having to invest in piecemeal DLC or picking up an entirely new game just to be able to play specific favorite tracks. For the hardcore, it provides hours of additional songs to master, bringing to mind the heydays of the impressive post-release support for the classic Rock Band series.

Anime fans easily get the most love from the service, with some popular new standards in the mix (theme songs from SPY X FAMILY and the films of Mamoru Hosoda, for two examples) and the near-entire discographies of cornerstone series (nostalgic mainstays like Dragon Ball, One Piece and Doraemon) – though it may be disappointing to find some of the biggest crowdpleasers are behind this paywall if you're more inclined to occasionally pull the game out for a party.

Luckily, the full Music Pass can be browsed before spending a single cent, and some tracks are available separately as permanent, traditional DLC. Just make sure to download the songs you want before heading offline – each track downloads individually at first play, for every single song.

Rhythm Festival dedicates most of its attention to the robustness Music Pass provides, and comes with significantly downsized minigame and story content compared to Taiko's previous releases. "The Great Toy War" introduces an item-fueled tug-of-war system, while "Dondoko Town" allows four players to tackle songs cooperatively with wacky individual instrumental tracks, à la Rock Band. These modes feel more like distractions than anything else, but do offer a fun way for new players to learn quick basics.

Every activity in-game contributes to a Battle Pass-style progression bar that unlocks songs, in-game currency and cute story vignettes, giving players benchmarks to constantly strive toward and incentive to play varied songs and modes for additional points and cosmetic unlocks.

Between the size of the Music Pass and unobtrusive side content, Rhythm Festival represents a surprisingly accessible starting point for would-be drummers. A new training mode that allows for playing sections of a song in slow motion also ensures newcomers don't get overwhelmed by the difficulty curve that comes with learning the game – which is basically learning a new instrument.

Without the use of the Music Pass, the core setlist can, at first glance, feel like a shockingly slimmed-down Taiko entry, but if Namco continues to support the service with more and more tracks before releasing more full games, Rhythm Festival offers more reasons to come back again and again with just a single jam-packed entry.

– JOHN-CHARLES

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: BANDAI NAMCO RATING: E

8.0

ARCHIVE

The complete list of Nintendo Force retail reviews from the last two years. Scores reflect individual reviewers' opinions.

SWITCH

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
AI: The Somnium Files – nirvanA Initiative	8.0	Tony	#62
Alex Kidd in Miracle World DX	7.5	David	#54
Atelier Ryza 2: Lost Legends & the Secret Fairy	8.0	Maggie	#51
Atelier Sophie 2: The Alchemist of the Mysterious Dream	8.0	Maggie	#59
Bakugan: Champions of Vestroia	6.5	Lucas	#51
Balan Wonderworld	5.0	Lucas	#52
Big Brain Academy: Brain vs. Brain	8.0	Kris	#58
Blue Reflection: Second Light	8.5	Maggie	#57
Bravely Default II	9.0	Nadia	#52
Bugsnax	8.5	Lucas	#61
Capcom Fighting Collection	9.0	Jonathan	#61
Cobra Kai: The Karate Kid Saga Continues	6.5	Kris	#50
Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time!	8.5	David	#52
Cris Tales	6.5	Maggie	#57
Cruis'n Blast	8.0	David	#56
DC Super Hero Girls: Teen Power	7.0	Kris	#53
Doki Doki Literature Club Plus!	8.5	Rebecca	#55
Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot	6.0	Kris	#56
Fire Emblem Warriors: Three Hopes	8.0	Rebecca	#61
G.I. Joe: Operation Blackout	6.5	Lucas	#54
Hot Wheels Unleashed	7.5	Lucas	#56
Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity	8.5	Tony	#50
John Wick Hex	7.5	Chris	#51
JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: All-Star Battle R	6.5	Tony	#62
Kingdom Hearts: Melody of Memory	7.0	Tony	#50
Kirby and the Forgotten Land	10	Lucas	#59
LEGO Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga	9.0	Thor	#59
LIVE A LIVE	8.5	Rebecca	#61
Mario Golf: Super Rush	9.0	Lucas	#54
Mario Party Superstars	8.5	Lucas	#57
Mario Strikers: Battle League	7.5	Lucas	#60
Metroid Dread	9.0	Tony	#56
Miitopia	7.5	Brett	#53
MLB The Show 22	8.5	Dan	#59
Monster Hunter Rise	9.0	Lucas	#52
Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings of Ruin	9.0	Maggie	#54
NEO: The World Ends with You	8.0	Rebecca	#55
NERF Legends	4.0	Lucas	#57
New Pokémon Snap	9.0	Lucas	#53
Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom – Prince's Edition	8.5	Brett	#56
Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl	7.5	Brett	#56
Nickelodeon Kart Racers 2: Grand Prix	7.0	David	#50
No More Heroes III	9.5	Jonathan	#55
Pac-Man Museum+	8.5	Kris	#60
Pac-Man World Re-Pac	7.5	Lucas	#62
Paw Patrol Mighty Pups: Save Adventure Bay!	8.5	Lucas	#51
Persona 5 Strikers	9.0	Maggie	#52
Pikmin 3 Deluxe	9.5	Lucas	#50
Pokémon Brilliant Diamond	6.5	Rebecca	#57
Pokémon Legends: Arceus	9.0	Lucas	#58
Pokémon Shining Pearl	6.0	Lucas	#57
Puyo Puyo Tetris 2	8.5	Rebecca	#50
R-Type Final 2	7.5	Jonathan	#53
Record of Lodoss War: Deedlit in Wonder Labyrinth	8.0	Jonathan	#60
Rune Factory 5	7.5	Maggie	#59
Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin	8.5	Lucas	#50
Shadowverse: Champion's Battle	8.0	Maggie	#55
Shin Megami Tensei V	8.0	Meghan	#57
Sonic Colors: Ultimate	5.0	Kris	#58
Splatoon 3	9.0	Lucas	#62
Story of Seasons: Pioneers of Olive Town	6.5	Rebecca	#53
Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury	10	Lucas	#51
Super Monkey Ball: Banana Mania	8.5	David	#56
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge	10	Lucas	#60
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Cowabunga Collection	9.0	David	#62
The Caligula Effect 2	8.0	Maggie	#58
The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles	9.0	Rebecca	#54
The Legend of Heroes: Trails from Zero	9.0	Maggie	#62
The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel IV	9.0	Maggie	#52
The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword HD	9.0	Lucas	#54
Transformers: Battlegrounds	7.5	Lucas	#54
Triangle Strategy	9.0	Nadia	#59
WarioWare: Get It Together!	7.5	Rebecca	#56
World's End Club	6.5	Kris	#55
Xenoblade Chronicles 3	10	Maggie	#62
Ys IX: Monstrum Nox	9.0	Lucas	#55

REVIEW REMINDER
FIRE EMBLEM AWAKENING

IT'S A REVIEW section inception!

NF's now been around long enough that we can refer back to our own reviews from over a decade ago! So let's do so now. With Fire Emblem Engage just about to be released, should you still take time to check out Awakening?

It's still the origin point of modern Fire Emblem, and new 3DS cartridges of it are still available to buy for the moment . . . but that stock is fading fast. Should you grab one while you can?

Daan Koopman kicked off his evaluation (NF's first Reviews section review ever!) by pointing out that Awakening's release was marking Fire Emblem's 10th anniversary in America. It had been one decade since Nintendo first localized a game in the series for the States – the one that was just called "Fire Emblem" for Game Boy Advance in 2003 – and Daan remarked that while the franchise's history in Japan stretched much farther back, Awakening instantly set itself apart from every installment that had come before. (Whether localized or not!)

A major element that made Awakening feel fresh was its use of a self-insert avatar character for the player. This character has come to be known as Robin in the Super Smash Bros. series since, but at the time players were really supposed to view him or her as themselves in the game world. Daan felt the array of options to customize the avatar's appearance was too limited.

Awakening introduced Casual and Classic playstyle options, removing the permadeath penalty that had defined the franchise up to that point. Daan praised the flexibility that offered when combined with the Easy, Normal and Hard general difficulty settings.

This sequel also saw the debut of dual battling – in which two hero characters would fight alongside one another in battle – and its story was centered largely on the return of "Marth" from the past, on a quest to help this future generation win a war. Sound familiar? Daan couldn't have known it at the time, 10 years ago, but Awakening was really laying down a foundation that several future sequels would build on. Several aspects of Engage could've originated from the same design documents first drafted for this game!

With that resonance through at least 10 years' worth of future sequels in mind, it's clear that anyone who loves the Fire Emblem series but came into it a bit too late to play Awakening when it was new should definitely make the effort to go back and play it. After all, Daan declared it's "the best strategy experience to be found on 3DS"! **— LUCAS**

ROM HACK

LYLAT ENLARGENED

The expansive new Star Fox EX extends the original experience!

RELEASE DATES AREN'T really real anymore.

These days most developers can – and do – continuing working on their games even after they've officially launched. Whether that's to add extra content as DLC or squash bugs that didn't get caught before the game went out the door, there's no longer any set finish line for dev teams like there was back in the pre-Internet days.

So what might have happened had some classic games from the SNES era had extra time to add more content and polish? Star Fox EX aims to answer that question!

Also known as "Star Fox Exploration Showcase," this is a massive romhack that wildly upgrades every single aspect of the original adventure of Fox McCloud. It's truly extreme what fan developer KandoWontu has accomplished here – more than just SNES DLC, this is basically an entirely new sequel riding piggyback (Pigmaback?) on the original game rom.

First up is a totally new story that plays out across 17 brand-new levels. It's a Super Smash Bros. kind of crazy, as more popular Nintendo icons like Mario, Luigi, Link and Samus Aran have all decided to gang up against Fox and his team to try to destroy the Lylat System – and the Star Fox series itself – for good! (They feel like the brand is weighing Nintendo down and needs to be cut loose.) So it's up to Fox to defend his own IP!

Boss battles against those mascots have been created from scratch, and are beautifully inventive. Link challenges players as a huge floating head at the end of the new Stage 1, while the boss music from A Link to the Past plays. Samus' level attacks players with energy-sucking Metroids before the bounty hunter herself flies into the fray in a ship shaped like her Morph Ball mode. It's amazing!

And that's just scratching the surface – there's a whole laundry list of new bells and whistles too! The game now supports multiplayer for up to five people simultaneously. There are new visual modes like having full camera control or rendering all objects with just wireframes. There's a 3D model viewer to take a closer look at every character and ship. You can even play it all with a Super Scope or an SNES Mouse! And it runs on real hardware too!

KandoWontu's work has even caught the attention of Dylan Cuthbert, the main programmer of the original game. He commented via Twitter:

"This guy is a madman. Great work getting it running so fast! Back in the day we were kind of flailing around in the dark and with only 10 months to make the game so there are probably lots of places to optimize in there."

See! If Dylan had been given more time back in the day, maybe some of this stuff would have made the cut originally! (Probably not the boss battle against Mario and Luigi, though.) **– LUCAS**

Romhacking.net/hacks/7285

CUSTOM LEGO BUILDS

A Supersized LEGO Super Mario Level!

Check out this triple-decker motorized Mario stage that really goes all-out!

WHEN LEGO ANNOUNCED a collaboration with Nintendo to produce a Super Mario line, eager fans envisioned more conventional builds than the interactive play experiences that wound up hitting retail. Children have thus far been served well by what are essentially modular board games that link to additional expansions, featuring electronic figurines that scan color plates and codes affixed to enemies and objects. But what of the sizable market of adult builders and their preference for awe-inspiring constructions to be displayed proudly in a dedicated corner of their nerd caves?

Those simplistic yet endearing kits lit the spark of creation within hobbyist Brandon Jones, who began planning just such an expansive display in September 2020, shortly after the release of the first wave of LEGO Super Mario sets. Pieces from those sets – such as Goombas, Koopa Troopas, Warp Pipes and of course the beefy LEGO Mario himself – served as the base upon which the studded brick Mushroom Kingdom of his dreams took form. And a staggering 12,067 pieces later, he debuted the completed "Mario in Motion" at BrickCon 2022 in Seattle, Washington.

The wispy interlocking lily pads of the official builds are out, and in their place are three tiers of 2D platforming heaven adorned with rolling hills, suspended blocks and those odd clouds that somehow have eyes. Jones incorporated elements from each of the mustachioed one's NES and SNES escapades and imbued them with life thanks to 14 motors that power their animations. Piranha Plants and Cheep Cheeps bounce up and down, lifts carry Mario to the next level of the course and a lone Boo floats lazily above the castle by the Goal Pole. There's even a reserve item box in the HUD area that cycles through two Super Mushrooms, a Fire Flower and a Super Star!

In the video walkthrough posted on the YouTube channel Beyond the Brick, Jones also spares a moment to reveal the magic behind the scenes. Wires snake around colorful towers of DUPLO windows that support the entire structure, while a pair of programmable MINDSTORMS EV3 Bricks direct every motion. The entire spectacle is an engineering marvel with the aesthetic charm of a preschooler's crayon vomit – but if it works, who are we to judge?

With his vision fully realized, Jones feels no compulsion to follow up with another Mario construction. That doesn't stop other master builders from picking up where he left, however! Of course, that would still leave the rest of us mere mortals without a proper "big kids" Mario level kit. C'mon, LEGO! Give us something more than just the Question Mark Block with the microscopic Super Mario 64 worlds! **– TONY**

YouTube.com/@BeyondTheBrick

PRESS RUN BOOK REVIEW

NES Works 1985 & '86

Let Jeremy Parish be your guide through Entertainment System history.

AFTER TAKING A look at one of the brand-new books printed by Limited Run Games' new Press Run imprint in our last issue, let's now press on with an evaluation of one of their reissues.

NES Works 1985 & '86 is on sale as of the first of December, but it's not the first time this content has been offered in print. The book is a new, combined volume of material that was previously sold separately by author Jeremy Parish in one-year-only 1985 and 1986 books – and before that, the 1985 portion was offered under the older Good Nintentions brand name. (Featured back in NF #27 when we interviewed Jeremy here in Community!) Some of the content may even go back further still, to the GameSpite Quarterly publications of years gone by – the point is, you might already own this material in a previous format.

For those who don't, though, this newest release would be a great addition to your bookshelf. It goes game-by-game through every NES release in chronological order, beginning with the Day 1 launch titles first offered for sale in the system's limited New York-only October 1985 rollout and rolling on through the end of the following year, by which point the NES was available all across the United States of America.

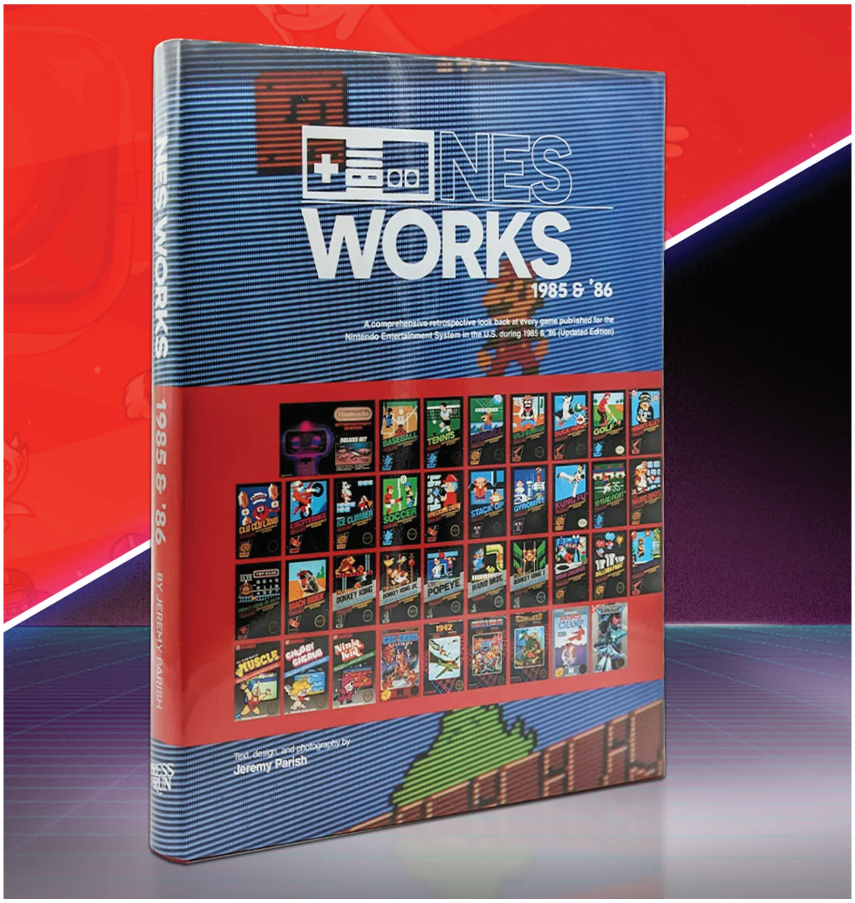
Every game gets great high-resolution photos of its original box, cartridge and instruction manual, then a curated selection of screenshots illustrate its action as Jeremy's words explaining the game's history run vertically alongside. The images catch your eye, but the words are the real treasure here: Jeremy is the most esteemed lorekeeper of video game history, and his deep knowledge of these games, the stories of their development and their legacies since release is unmatched.

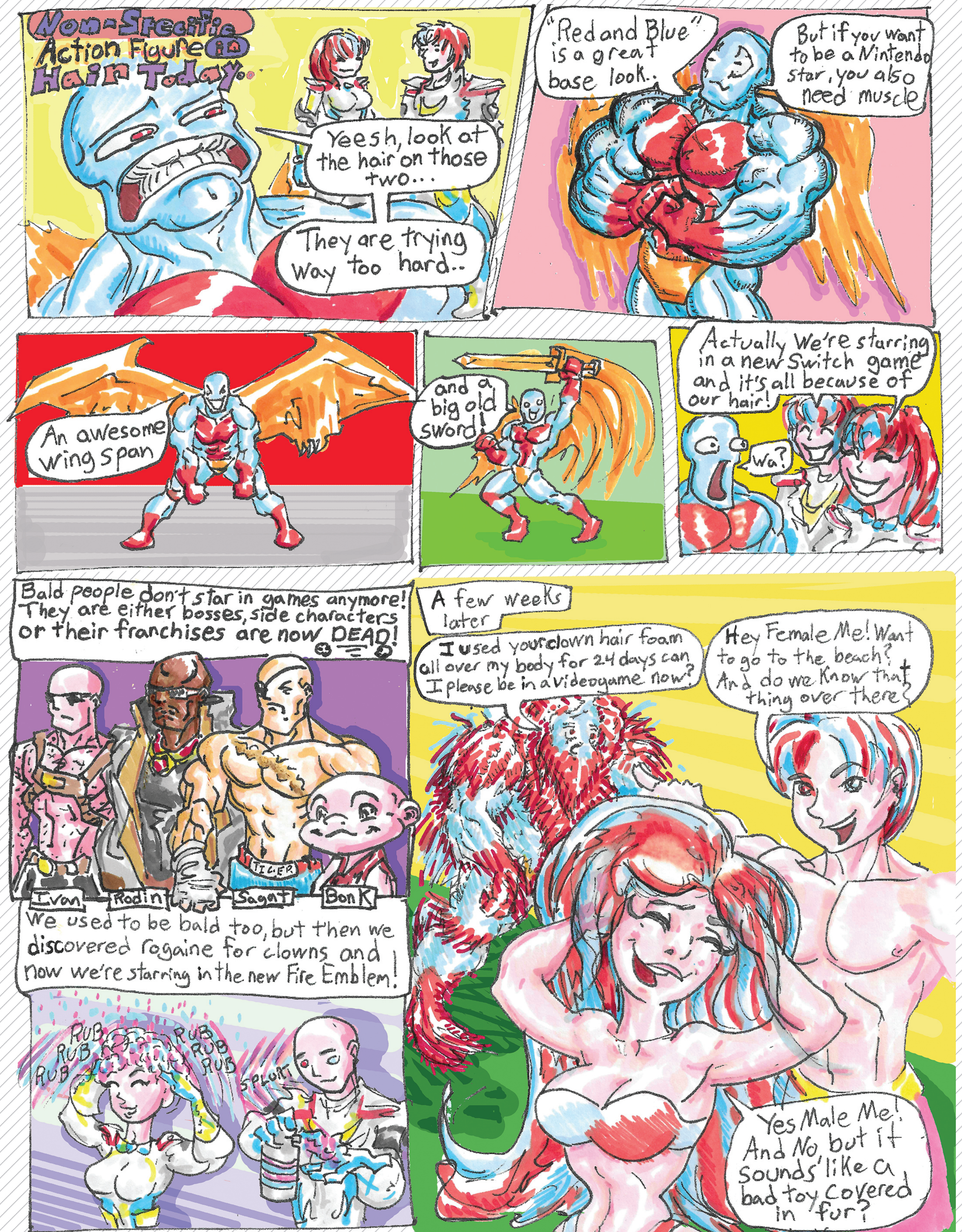
Unfortunately, a few errors do take away from the fun of poring over these pages. A few examples: the introductory text on the dust jacket calls the early NES releases the "Black Black" games (should be "Black Box"), a column of screenshots in the middle of the Super Mario Bros. pages is printed twice, right next to one another, and Jeremy says the Ice Climbers made their playable Smash Bros. debut in Brawl (it was really Melee). These are all ultimately minor offenses, but since this material has been reprinted so many times at this point, I would've thought any wrinkles like that would've been ironed out years ago.

But even if the book isn't 100% pefect, it's still 100% recommended. Grab a copy and increase your own level of NES knowledge! **– LUCAS**

8.5

LimitedRunGames.com





BY JONATHAN HOLMES

NEXT ISSUE

IN THE WORKS FOR ISSUE #64:

THE SUPER MARIO BROS. MOVIE

THE LEGACY OF THE **NINTENDO 64**

KIRBY'S RETURN TO DREAM LAND DELUXE

FIRE EMBLEM ENGAGE

OCTOPATH TRAVELER II

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

SONIC FRONTIERS

RIVER CITY GIRLS 2

BAYONETTA ORIGINS: CEREZA AND THE LOST DEMON

ATARI 50: THE ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

SUPER KIWI 64

AND MUCH **MORE!**

MARCH/ APRIL 2023

Our annual March/April issue is coming up next, and this year the biggest Nintendo event happening in that time frame isn't a new game release – it's the debut of the brand-new **Super Mario Bros. Movie**! We'll take a closer look at what you can expect to see on the silver screen. And, since it'll also be Issue #64, we'll take some time to reflect on the legacy of the Nintendo 64 as well! (We just can't let that great number pass us by.) We'll see you back here then! Wahoo!!

GAMES OF THE DECADE

We just declared our award winners for 2022 earlier in this issue, but since we've been reflecting on the entire past decade that led up to this anniversary edition, we thought we should look back across NF's first 10 Game of the Year award winners too! Below are the games we chose as the best releases from each of their respective release years.

We began with Kid Icarus: Uprising as our pick for the best of 2012, even though we didn't start publishing issues until 2013! Nintendo Power never got a chance to do a final awards presentation, so we took it upon ourselves to crown Pit's comeback in their place.

What's truly great about these selections as a group: Every Game of the Year we've ever selected has represented a different series! That wasn't even intentional. It's just a happy coincidence!

2012
KID ICARUS: UPRISING

2013
FIRE EMBLEM AWAKENING

2014
SHOVEL KNIGHT

2015
SPLATOON

2016
POKÉMON SUN & MOON

2017
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD

2018
SUPER SMASH BROS. ULTIMATE

2019
DRAGON QUEST XI S: ECHOES OF AN ELUSIVE AGE - DEFINITIVE EDITION

2020
ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW HORIZONS

2021
METROID DREAD

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